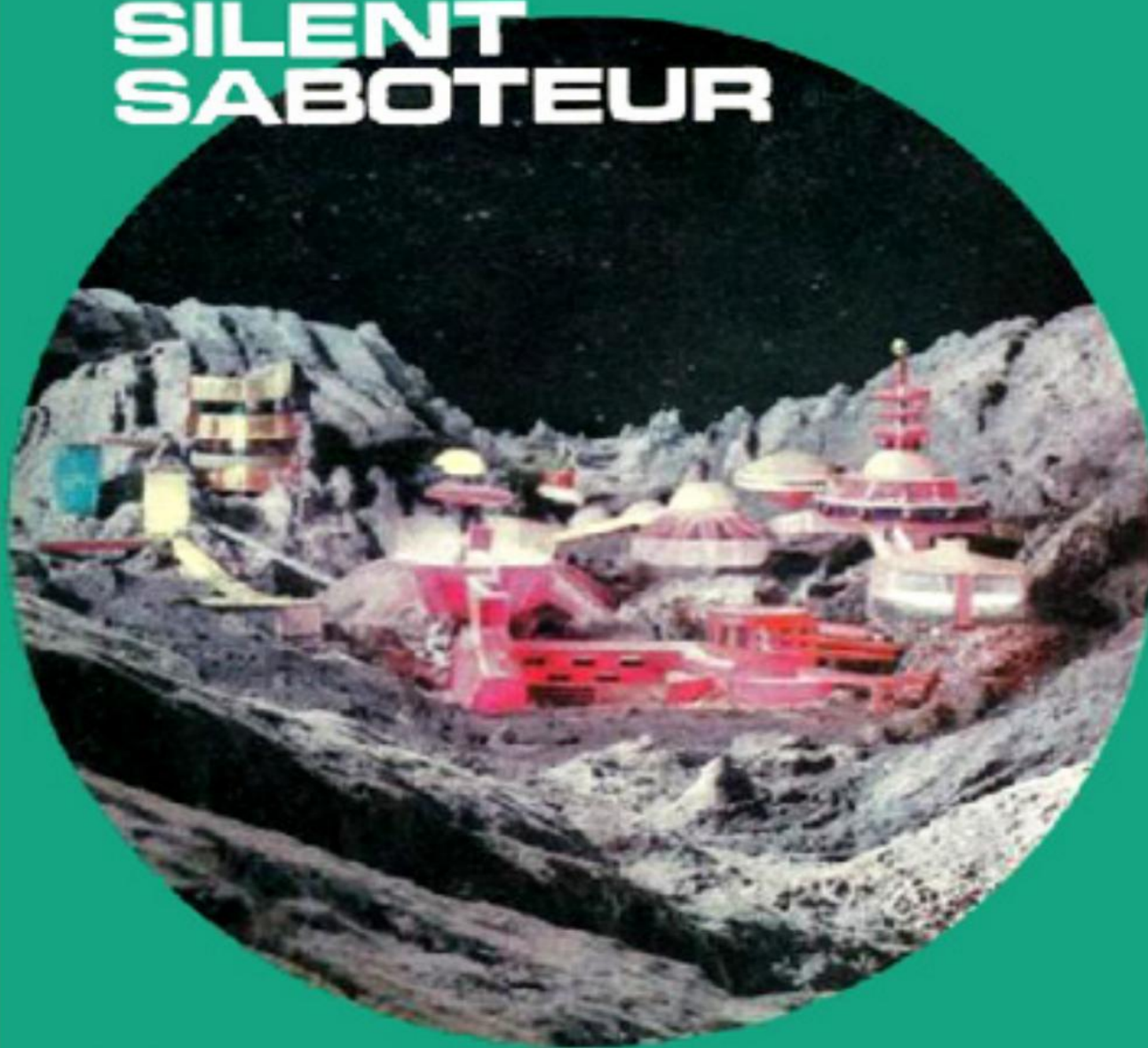


Gerry Anderson's


ARMADA
PAPERBACKS for
Boys & Girls

CAPTAIN SCARLET

AND THE SILENT SABOTEUR



No. 2

SPECTRUM FILE

compiled by JOHN THEYDON

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CAPTAIN SCARLET AND THE SILENT SABOTEUR

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Gerry Anderson's

Captain Scarlet and the Silent Saboteur

by

JOHN THEYDON

**TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS
BY CHRIS HIGHAM**

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in co-operation with Century 21 Publishing Ltd



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CAPTAIN SCARLET AND THE MYSTERONS

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CHAPTER 1

Night Intruder

A HUGE DAPPLED MOON hung high over San Diego Bay, painting a path of rippled silver across the Pacific towards the white walls of the new dockyard, where arc lights dimmed its brilliance. Two guards in the white uniform of the U.S. Navy ambled along the curving seaward arm of the specially constructed pen in which lay the slender gleaming shape of the submarine *Oceanus X*.

“Gee!” murmured the bigger of them, shifting a wad of gum from one side of his powerful jaw to the other. “Just look at that moon, Miguel. Good enough to eat, eh, buddy?”

“If you like cheese.” Miguel’s swarthy face wrinkled into a smile. “To think, *amigo*, that there are men up there—just like you and me, Hank.”

“Not like *me*, buddy! I wouldn’t go up there if they paid me a million bucks—cash in advance. Me, I like to keep my feet on solid ground.”

Miguel laughed softly. “That is why you join the Navy, *si*?”

“Aw you know what I mean!” Hank was silent for a moment, chewing, as he contemplated the motionless submarine below him. “Just fancy, we got space ships that can put guys on the moon and the planets—yet we still go on building subs to grub about on the ocean floor. Don’t make sense.”

“Ah, but you do not understand, *amigo*. There are many secrets still that we must wrest from the oceans. Even in the middle of the twenty-first century, we know less about them than we do about outer space.”

“Yeah, I guess so. And the *Oceanus* is gonna help do that, in a big way, huh?”

“*Si, si, amigo*. Much of her equipment is still on the secret list, but they say she can stay submerged indefinitely. She has marvellous computers that can do all kinds of wonderful things.”

“And just three guys can handle her, huh?”

Hank was lost in rapt admiration as they turned at the sea gate to the pen and began to walk back along the mole. “Makes you mighty proud to be in a Navy that’s got eggheads who can think up...”

He broke off and came to a halt, staring along the curving mole toward the pen’s buildings.

“What is wrong, *amigo*?” Miguel asked, suddenly tense.

“Figured I saw someone moving by that store shed. Seemed like he came up over the top of the mole.”

“From the water?” Miguel drew in his breath. “*Caramba!* Maybe it is a spy, Hank?”

“A spy? Shucks, who’d want to spy on the *Oceanus*? All the world’s at peace under one government, ain’t it?”

“Not *all* the world, *amigo*,” Miguel said quietly, drawing his machine pistol. “You forget Bereznik.”

“Yeah, that’s right. She won’t join the world federation. Just think of the trouble she could cause with a submarine like the *Oceanus*. Come on, let’s go!”

They broke into a run, their heavy boots clattering on the smooth surface of the mole.

“You take one side, I’ll take the other,” panted Hank, as they approached the shed. “He’s probably skulking behind it.”

Hank, lumbering round the seaward side of the shed, was suddenly aware of a slim black-clad figure silhouetted against the lights of the base.

“Hold it, buddy!” he rasped, bringing up his pistol. “I got you—”

Something phutted in the gloom and a small missile exploded softly on his face. A faint acrid smell touched his nostrils, tears started in his eyes, and then he was crumpling. The last thing of which he was aware as he hit the concrete was a quiet, mocking laugh.

Miguel, coming round the other side of the shed, checked when he saw the dim black-masked figure standing over the unconscious form of his fellow-guard. Before he could press the firing button of his pistol, another gas missile exploded in his face.

Gasping for breath, he dropped his gun and staggered towards the outer edge of the mole. He would have toppled over into the bay had the masked man not shot out a hand and pulled him back.

“Pardon, *mes amis*,” the intruder murmured, letting the already unconscious Miguel slip gently to the mole. “There is nothing personal in this. You will be all right in a few hours.”

After a glance towards the main dock buildings, where figures were silhouetted against the lighted windows, he moved stealthily along the mole and vanished over the edge of the pen, close to the moored submarine.

Commander Gregson frowned at the two crestfallen guards standing before his desk in the control room of the submarine unit.

“You’ve no idea what this intruder looked like?” he demanded.

“No, sir,” growled Hank. “All I saw was a slim guy in black standing there against the lights—and then something exploded in my mug—sorry, sir—my face, and I went out like a light. Now I gotta taste like old boots.”

“Nerve gas missile,” the Commander said dryly, keeping a straight face with an effort. “For your information, you’ve been out three hours. What about you, Gonzales?”

Miguel shrugged. "I saw little more than Willet, sir. The man had a black mask over his face, I think. I am sorry we permit ourselves to be caught napping, sir."

"It could have happened to anyone," the Commander said gruffly. "If anyone is to blame perhaps it's me—I should have set a double guard. But the *Oceanus* is not a strike vessel. I did not expect a spy."

"Just what I says to Miguel, sir, but—" Hank broke off under the steely gaze of the Commander's grey eyes. "Sorry, sir!"

"Okay—that's all for now," the Commander said.

The two men saluted and left. The Commander swung his chair and pressed a button on a control desk. The face of a youngish man appeared on a monitor screen.

"Any luck, Captain?" the Commander asked.

"No, sir. We've scanned the *Oceanus* fore and aft and inside and out with everything at our disposal. If any sabotage device has been planted in or on her, it's something new to us."

Commander Gregson frowned. "Maybe I'm wrong, Captain, but I've got a hunch that sabotage isn't behind this. If somebody was crack-brained enough to want to blow the *Oceanus* to blazes, they could have done it at any time in the three months she's been a-building. Why wait till the eve of her launching?"

"Exhibitionism, sir—you know, the apple of the Navy's eye blows up on her maiden trip and this guy gets a hell of a kick out of the sensation."

"Could be. Any idea how he reached the pen? Rating Willet said he thought he saw him come up over the side of the mole."

"Too true he did, sir. We've found metal climbing grips fixed to the wall of the mole by suction pads. He either swam out in a skin suit—or rowed out in a dinghy."

“Yeah, or maybe he used a midget sub,” growled the Commander. “We could go on guessing all night. I’m referring this to higher authority. I don’t know that I can take the risk of going ahead with the official launching this afternoon. Keep me posted on developments.”

“Yes, sir!”

The Captain went off the circuit and, after a moment’s hesitation, Commander Gregson stabbed a red button. Presently, a ruffled-looking grey-haired man in a gaudy dressing gown appeared on the screen.

“What the blazes—Commander! D’you know it’s two in the morning? Somebody declared war on us or something?”

“Could be, Admiral,” the Commander said dryly. “I’m sorry I had to use the hot line, but I’m up against something that I’m not prepared to take responsibility for making a decision on.”

The irritation faded from the Admiral’s face. “Like that, eh? Go ahead, Commander!”

He listened intently as Gregson told him what had happened at the submarine pen and added the report of the security officer, then said:

“You’re right, Commander! It’s a deuce of a decision to have to make. I’m not sure that even I’ve got the right—or the nerve, come to that—to make it.”

“Might I respectfully suggest you defer it to the Minister of State for Naval Affairs, sir.”

“Minister of State be jiggered, Commander! I’m referring it to World President Younger himself. He’s taken a personal interest in this *Oceanus* project and he’s due to launch the thing this afternoon. I guess we ought to give *him* the privilege of deciding whether he wants to run the risk of being blasted to perdition.”

In spite of the anxiety gnawing at him, Commander Gregson had difficulty in suppressing a smile. *Passing the buck, all of us!* he thought.

Aloud, he said, "I think that's a very good idea, sir."

In Unity City, three thousand miles away, President Younger was called from his bed at dawn to the videophone in his private study. It took him no longer to make his decision than it did to get the facts from Admiral Grant.

"The show must go on, Admiral—I think that is the expression," he said with a grave smile. "We must not set a bad example by sounding panic stations. There might be absolutely nothing to it. You agree, Admiral?"

"Most certainly, sir! Meanwhile, of course, I shall instruct Commander Gregson to continue his efforts to discover the reason for the intruder's visit."

"Naturally. I'll be looking forward to lunching with you prior to the launching."

But, after he had switched off, President Younger sat contemplating his decision, his brow furrowed.

Then he flicked a switch and spoke into the intercom microphone to his personal aide.

"Get me Colonel White of Spectrum! Emergency channel."

In the big control room of Cloudbase, headquarters of the world security organisation known as Spectrum, hovering on powerful jet engines forty thousand feet above the Earth, a red light winked rapidly. Lieutenant Green, personal assistant to Colonel White, turned from the long computer banks at which he sat.

"W.P. calling you, sir. Emergency channel."

Colonel White's rugged face tightened. "S.I.G., Lieutenant—put him through."

The President's image appeared on the monitor screen before the Spectrum chief's control desk.

"Colonel," he said earnestly, "I may be crying wolf, but I think we could have trouble—Mysteron trouble."

The colonel's grey eyes gleamed. "Well, they have been kind of quiet lately, sir," he said calmly. "Maybe it's about time they took another crack at us."

The Mysterons, strange beings from outer space, had declared a slow war of nerves on Earth after their City Complex on Mars had been attacked by an Earth expeditionary force. Formerly peaceful, they had now vowed that their ultimate objective was the total destruction of Earth and its teeming billions. They had powers unknown and inconceivable to Man, among them that of recreating matter, both organic and inorganic, that had been killed or destroyed—the power known as retrometabolism.

It was to combat the insidious menace of the Mysterons that Spectrum, all of whose officers had colour code names, had been created. Colonel White, a tough fifty-year-old Londoner, and his hand-picked team of young captains had fought back grimly, with more successes than failures. But there were times when Colonel White wondered bitterly if they were fighting a losing battle—a battle that all their efforts could only prolong, maybe for years.

There was no hint of this gloomy thought in his voice as he said, "Please give me the facts on which you base your hunch, sir."

President Younger reported what Admiral Grant had told him. A videotape recorded every word and gesture.

When the president had finished, Colonel White pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“You’re suggesting this intruder might have been a Mysteron agent, sir?”

“Yes, Colonel. The guards say he was dressed in black. I wondered if he could have been...”

“*Captain Black?*”

“Yes!”

Captain Black, a former Spectrum member who had led the fateful expedition on Mars and whose body had been taken over by the Mysterons, was their chief agent on Earth and had, in pursuance of their war of nerves, led Spectrum officers on many a wild goose chase, obscuring the real objective.

“One of the guards also said that the intruder wore a black mask, sir,” Colonel White said. “I’ve never known Captain Black to wear such a thing, although I suspect he may have worn a moulded mask at times to avoid recognition.”

“So you think I *am* crying wolf, Colonel?”

Colonel White smiled. “I wouldn’t say that, sir. Something strange undoubtedly happened down at the sub-base. And I don’t think we should take any chances. I’ll send a couple of my men along.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” The President smiled in obvious relief. “I’m not worried on my own account—as World President I’m hardened to being a target for assassination—but there will be a lot of people at the launching—some of them of vital importance to our defence systems.”

“I appreciate that, sir. But I don’t think you need worry overmuch at present. The Mysterons never make a move without openly warning the whole world over the radio channels, as you know. Until we get that warning we need not fear a catastrophe—and remember, they always give us sufficient time to organise counter-action. It’s part of their sinister game

—to challenge and trick us, involve us in a battle of wits and lay red herrings across the trail, before they go in for the final kill.”

“H’m! Of course this *Oceanus* business *could* be one of the red herrings?”

“Possibly. Only time can tell. I will keep you in touch with developments, sir.”

“Thank you, Colonel!” The President smiled wearily. “I feel a lot easier in my mind for having spoken to you.”

After Younger’s image had vanished from the screen, Colonel White got up from his desk and walked to one of the big windows of the control room. It was full daylight up here in the stratosphere, thousands of miles from Unity City. Far below, the Earth was like a near full moon, with the edge of night receding towards the coastline of the Americas. Down there, millions lived and worked and played, either ignorant of or indifferent to the menace that was always in their midst. Many times, thousands of them had escaped annihilation because the vigilance of Spectrum had averted Mysteron-planned disasters.

And now?

He passed a hand over his brow as if trying to wipe away the thoughts that gnawed at his mind, and turned to Lieutenant Green, who was watching him anxiously.

“Order Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue to report, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir!”

Green stabbed a button on the computer bank, and spoke into a microphone.

In the luxurious rest lounge, Captain Scarlet looked up from the book he was reading as he heard the call. He glanced at Captain Blue, the fair-haired American, who was dozing on a couch with his feet up.

“Hear that, Rip Van Winkle?” he called. “The Great White Chief wants us.”

“I heard,” Blue said, sitting up and patting a yawn. “You don’t think a guy could sleep with your brain making all those agonising noises as it tried to understand any word of more than two syllables.”

Scarlet grinned lazily as he eased his rangy length out of the chair. “It’s a good thing for Spectrum that at least *one* of us can read, pal.”

With a chuckle Captain Ochre looked round from the electronic jigsaw he was doing.

“Why don’t you two guys go along to the gym and knock some sense into each other?”

“Aw, heck! It would be no contest from the start. I’d be attempting the impossible,” drawled Captain Blue—then ducked hastily as Scarlet’s book hurtled at his head.

“Temper! Temper!” he chided, getting to his feet. “Come along, buddy! Let’s go see the chief. Maybe he’s got a chore for us to do. I’m going to seed lazing around.”

Colonel White greeted them with a smile as they entered the control room. They were his best field operators and Scarlet, in particular, he regarded as indispensable in the fight against their relentless enemies.

For Scarlet, like the Mysterons, had the ability to recreate himself, to return seemingly from the dead. For six hours, during an earlier clash with the Mysterons, he had been apparently dead and in *their* power but, when rescued, his injuries had healed with amazing speed and now he was virtually indestructible by anything less than a nuclear bomb.

Colonel White touched buttons on his desk and two stools rose from the floor. He invited the two men to sit down and switched on the video playback.

“It hasn’t the hallmarks of a Mysteron operation—as yet,” he went on, when they had listened to the President’s story. “But we’ll take no chances. You two will attend the launching ceremony. If there are Mysteron agents present, you, Scarlet, should be able to sense them.”

Scarlet nodded. No doubt because of the fact that he was partly Mysteronised, he often experienced acute nausea when close to a real Mysteron. It had been an invaluable aid at times and more than once had turned near disaster into triumph.

But for this reason the Mysterons, and in particular Captain Black, regarded Scarlet as their most dangerous opponent and, in spite of his power of retrometabolism, he had constantly to be on the alert against their devising some means of destroying him.

“But you will also take a Mysteron detector,” went on the Colonel, “and, of course, you will be armed with anti-Mysteron pistols. The launching is not due for another twelve hours, but I suggest you leave right away. The Naval authorities will afford you complete co-operation. You might detect something their security men have missed.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

They stood up, and as an afterthought the Colonel said, “If this is a Mysteron operation, they are no doubt aware that we have been alerted. Therefore, I think you’d better have an Angel escort to San Diego—just in case our friends from outer space try to eliminate my two best operatives en route. Captain Ochre will pilot you and then return to base. Good luck!”

As Scarlet and Blue left the control room, Lieutenant Green stabbed a button and spoke into a microphone. “Destiny Angel, stand by for escort duty!”

Sitting in the cockpit of her jet, at the apex of the V formation of strike craft permanently at the ready on the flight deck, Destiny, the ash-blonde

French girl, acknowledged the order.

In the Amber room, the luxurious rest lounge used by Destiny and the four other Angels—the beautiful air aces who piloted the ultra-sonic jets of the Spectrum strike force—Lieutenant Green’s voice echoed over the intercom.

“Immediate launch! Angels One, Two and Three! Close escort for Spectrum passenger jet.”

Melody the dusty girl from the Southern States of America, put down her book and smiled at Rhapsody, the golden-haired English member of the team.

“That’s us, honey. Let’s go!”

Putting on their transparent helmets, the two girls made quickly for the elevator. As they approached, the crinkled amber-coloured door opened to reveal two fighter aircraft seats supported by steel tubes. The girls turned about and sat down and the seats slid back to the centre of the elevator shaft. The door closed and the seats shot up on their tubes through trap doors in the launch deck, into hatches that opened below the cockpits of their aircraft.

The tubes retracted and the two jets catapulted away along the flight deck, to scream into the haze of the stratosphere and form a flying arrowhead with Destiny’s craft, which was already airborne.

In the control room, Lieutenant Green reported to Colonel White. “All Angels skyborne, sir.”

“S.I.G., Lieutenant.”

A green light flashed and the voice of Captain Ochre filled the intercom.

“Captains Scarlet and Blue are aboard S.P.J. Request launch clearance.”

Lieutenant Green glanced at his chief, who nodded.

“Spectrum is Green,” the Lieutenant said.

A port opened in the roof of the bay which housed the Spectrum Passenger Jet, and it rose on its hydraulic elevator to the launch deck, then catapulted away.

At a word of command from Destiny, the Angels banked and wheeled in perfect formation, taking up their escort positions: Angel One in the van and Angels Two and Three on either side of the passenger jet. Then the formation screamed away round the world, chasing the receding night.

In the control room, Colonel White stood at the window, watching them go.

“Think there’s anything in it, sir?” asked Lieutenant Green.

“I don’t know—I just don’t know.” The Colonel sighed. “I’m not a superstitious man—but I’m keeping my fingers crossed.”

CHAPTER 2

Mysteron Warning

FROM THE ROSTRUM at the end of the submarine pen, the United States Minister of State for Naval Affairs was ponderously introducing President Younger to the distinguished gathering on the dockside.

In the pen, the sleek shape of *Oceanus X* gleamed in the high Pacific sun, its three-man crew drawn up at ease on the small conning-tower deck. No mere underwater sailors these, but highly-skilled technicians carefully selected from a thousand applicants.

At the rear of the crowd, where a double file of armed Naval ratings was stationed, Captain Regan, submarine section security officer, muttered, “When that guy’s wound up he just goes on and on. Wish he’d cut the cackle and let the President get on with the job.”

Captain Scarlet, standing beside him with Captain Blue, shot him a sardonic glance.

“Scared something’ll go up in smoke, Captain?”

“Heck, no. I’m bone tired, brother. Been up since midnight on this caper. The minute that blamed sub hits the high seas, I’m hitting a bunk.”

He suppressed a yawn and looked at the crowd on the dockside.

“With the precautions we took, an unauthorised mouse couldn’t have got in here today, let alone a human being,” he added, with a hint of satisfaction in his voice at a job well done.

“It’s not unauthorised humans we’re worried about, Captain,” Scarlet said. “If a Mysteron agent had showed up, he wouldn’t have been carrying a

banner. To all appearances he might have been one of the invited elite—or a serviceman—even you or Commander Gregson!”

“*Me?*” The Captain looked so startled that Scarlet laughed.

“Relax, Captain. I said might have been. If *you’d* been Mysteronised, Captain Blue and I would have known. We scanned you immediately we arrived, just before dawn.”

“The deuce you did!”

“Sorry, Captain, but it was absolutely necessary,” Captain Blue put in. He tapped an instrument like a camera hooked to his belt. “With this Mysteron detector we checked all Naval personnel, including the sub’s crew, and everyone admitted to the launching ceremony.”

“Not excepting the President and the Minister of State and Admiral Grant,” Scarlet added. “We haven’t found one Mysteron.”

“What does that prove?”

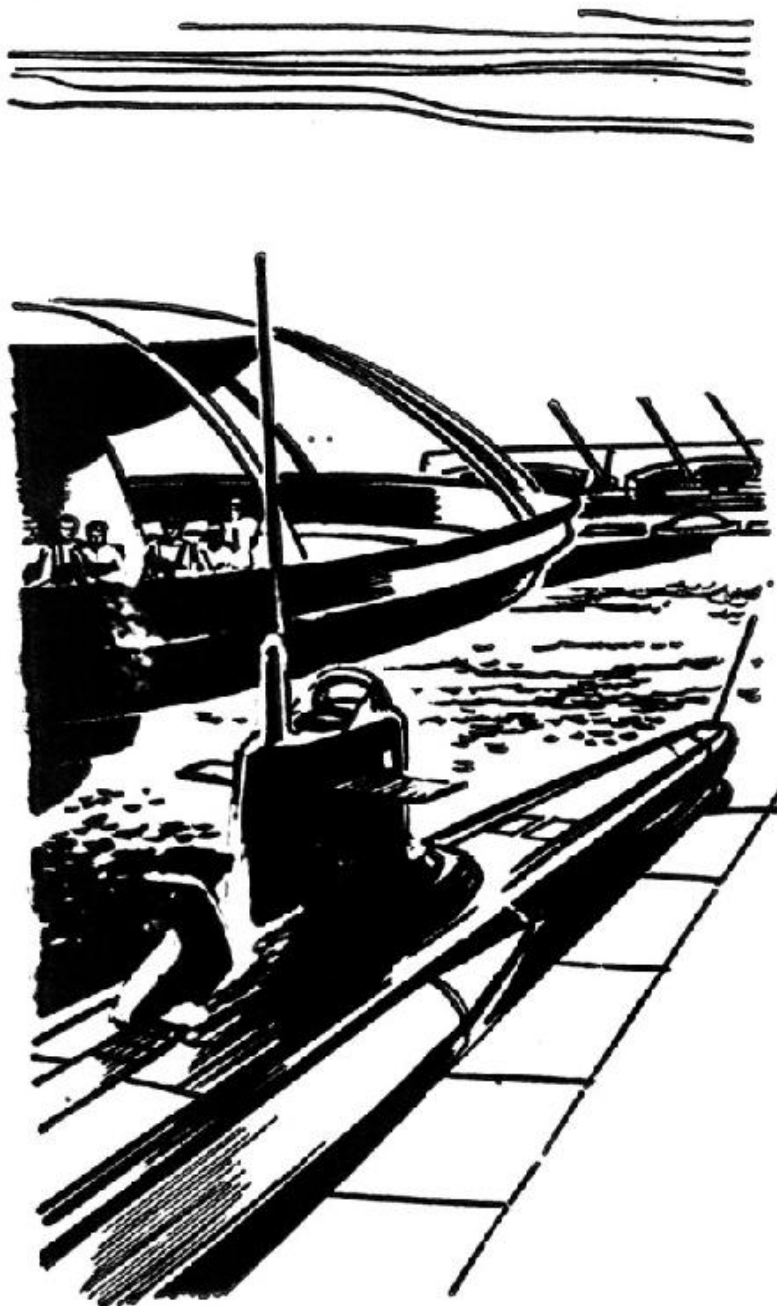
“Precious little,” Scarlet replied laconically. “There could still be a Mysteron agent hiding here.”

But, he told himself, the likelihood was remote, for his own strange sixth sense would surely have detected the agent? Only rarely did it fail to function.

Scarlet turned his attention to the President who was talking now, the video cameras trained on him.

“...although the *Oceanus X* is primarily designed for peaceful exploration of the vast ocean depths, it was not thought right that she should be defenceless. Even in a world ostensibly at peace with itself, there are unscrupulous organisations and individuals who would covet a vessel of such potentialities.”

A buzz of appreciation and agreement went round the crowd.



“And so, my friends, apart from conventional means of defence—and I repeat *defence*—the *Oceanus X* is equipped with a secret device that renders it undetectable by any known scanning system.” The President glanced round at the small group of people on the rostrum with him. “Am I right, Admiral?”

“You are, sir,” said Admiral Grant. “While the *Oceanus* is undertaking her extensive trials, we shall demonstrate the effectiveness of this screening device, the

details of which must remain top secret, of course.”

A slim, neatly-dressed man with a trim, pointed black beard, standing just in front of Captain Scarlet, uttered a slightly mocking laugh at the Admiral’s words.

“What’s so funny, sir?” Scarlet asked politely, his eyes searching the smiling face that was turned to him.

“The Admiral’s claim, *mon ami*—it is preposterous.”

“Why?”

The man shrugged. “It is not possible to screen anything so effectively that it *cannot* be detected.”

Scarlet stiffened. In spite of the man’s smile, there was a hint of dogmatic arrogance in his smooth voice that reminded him of a Mysteron agent with whom he had once clashed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Captain Blue raise his Mysteron detector, and knew the same thought must have crossed his colleague’s mind.

“To every offensive weapon or means of defence,” the man went on, “there has always been an answer and always will be. *Tiens!* It is the eternal vicious circle.” His dark eyes twinkled as he met Scarlet’s searching gaze. “*Eh bien!* We shall see what we shall see, *mon cher Capitaine Scarlet.*”

He raised his dapper panama with almost studied courtesy and moved off through the crowd, leaving Scarlet staring thoughtfully after him.

“Who is that guy?” Captain Blue asked the Naval security officer. “Face is kinda familiar, but I can’t place him.”

“Jacques Berlein, the famous oceanographer. Swiss national. Security rating A1. Personal buddy of Admiral Grant, although they don’t always see eye to eye, as you can gather by what he said about the screening device. Bit of a card. Fond of playing practical jokes. Invents tricks and puzzles as a hobby, apart from more serious things.”

Captain Scarlet caught Blue’s eye inquiringly, and Blue shook his head. “Detector showed negative reaction,” he said.

Captain Regan stared at them. “Say you didn’t suspect that Berlein was a Mysteron agent? Why, you checked him in not an hour ago—”

“Sure,” Captain Blue said, “but a lot can happen in that time—he could even have been Mysterionised.”

Regan licked his lips. “Like that, huh? You guys have sure got a tough job. I figured mine was bad enough. But I’m glad Berlein’s okay. He’s a swell guy.”

There was a burst of applause as President Younger ended his speech.

In spite of his growing conviction that, whatever the explanation of the mysterious episode of the night before, the Mysterons were not involved, Captain Scarlet’s pulse quickened as the President prepared to press the golden button that would trigger electronic impulses to cast off the submarine’s moorings. He and Captain Blue had checked and double-checked the submarine inside and out and, like Regan before them, had found nothing suspicious. But what if *they* had missed something?

The three crewmen had already gone below. As the hawsers fell away from her gleaming hull, *Oceanus X* moved off down the pen with scarcely a sound beyond the faint rippling of water away from her slim bows. As she approached the end of the pen, the sea gates, operated by a coded signal transmitted by the submarine, opened to allow her to slide gracefully through into the open sea.

From a loudspeaker on the rostrum, the voice of the submarine’s commander reported.

“*Oceanus X* to base commander. We are about to submerge. Will now break contact and renew at fifteen hundred hours.”

“Okay, skipper,” Commander Gregson replied crisply into a hand microphone. “Meanwhile we’ll try to track you. Bon voyage!”

The beautiful vessel slid smoothly beneath the Pacific swell and was gone, nosing down into the deepwater channel that twisted out into the dark depths of the vast and still unconquered ocean. As the crowd on the

dockside dispersed towards the administrative buildings, Captain Scarlet pulled down his cap's peak microphone and contacted Cloudbase.

"So it seems that the Mysterons are not involved?" Colonel White said.

"Yes, sir."

"S.I.G. I'll send the jet to pick you up."

Two hours later Scarlet and Blue were hurtling back to Cloudbase with an Angel escort. Over the Atlantic, Blue glanced curiously at his companion.

"You're kinda quiet, buddy. What's on your mind? Wondering what's for supper?"

Scarlet grinned wryly. "That fellow Jacques Berlein. Something odd about him."

"Well, he's not a Mysteron. We double-checked him and Regan gave him the okay from their angle. Quit worrying, pal. Save that great brain for the Mysteron problem."

Their epaulettes flashed green and simultaneously their cap microphones swung down.

"Stand by!" said Lieutenant Green's voice. "This is a red alert."

Scarlet's pulses quickened and, exchanging a glance with his colleague, saw his own excitement mirrored in the other's blue eyes.

Colonel White came through. "Listen, boys," he said urgently. "We've just had a flash from San Diego. *Oceanus X* has disappeared—destroyed they believe."

"What?" gasped Scarlet. "But how."

"I've got no details as yet. Get back there as fast as you can. It could be that we were sold a dummy."

"S.I.G., sir."

Blue gave an order to Captain Ochre at the controls. He relayed it to the three Angels and the whole flight wheeled in tight formation and went screaming back towards the American mainland.

Within the hour, Scarlet and Blue were in conference in Commander Gregson's control room, with Gregson and Captain Regan.

"The facts are few, but pretty conclusive, gentlemen," the Commander said. "At fifteen hundred hours Pacific time, sixty minutes exactly after launching time, the skipper of the *Oceanus X* made contact as prearranged. At sixteen hundred hours he came through again. In between those times we had failed to locate the sub, although we used every detector and scanner at our disposal—on shore and in underwater, surface and air craft."

"So the screening device was working to perfection sir," Scarlet put in.

"Obviously. At seventeen hundred hours the skipper came through again—five hundred miles south of the estimated course we had plotted in the hope of catching him napping. He had just given his position in reference area W357S when contact was broken abruptly—too abruptly."

"An explosion?" Captain Blue asked.

"No. The radio buoy link would have relayed evidence which would have registered on our screen," Captain Regan explained.

"It might have been a transmitter fault."

"The *Oceanus* had two reserve transmitters, Captain Scarlet," the Commander said flatly. "That sudden cut-off could therefore only spell trouble. I immediately ordered every search craft to converge on the reference point quoted. They found the radio buoy—and *this!*" Commander Gregson pressed a switch on his control desk and the big monitor screen lit up. Into focus came the heaving grey-green waters of the ocean—and floating on it were the bodies of three men in the uniform of the U.S. Submarine Service, still harnessed to their ejector units.

“I don’t need to tell you who they are, gentlemen.” There was a bitter edge to the commander’s voice.

“The *Oceanus* crew, huh?” Scarlet said. “Gee, that’s tough! I’m sorry, Commander.”

“How did they die?” Blue asked.

“The initial autopsy indicates some form of intense radiation. The search craft detected radiation in the water too. Obviously the crew were automatically ejected when the sub met trouble.”

“Any trace of wreckage?” Scarlet demanded.

“None. They’re still searching, but there’s a mighty deep trench in that reference area—too deep for anything of ours to plumb.”

“Although the *Oceanus* herself could have done it,” Captain Regan added with a wry smile.

Scarlet frowned. “Any theories, Commander?”

“I was hoping Spectrum could supply those, Captain.”

“You mean—a Mysteron job?” Scarlet smiled tightly. “Your guess is as good as mine on the limited data we have, Commander. There was no warning.”

“Does there have to be? I think I can recall hearing of instances of craft or vehicles being Mysteronised as a kind of prelude to a major Mysteron operation.”

“Sure,” Captain Blue agreed. “But I’d figure the *Oceanus* was a big enough target in itself for the Mysterons.”

“It’s no use speculating,” Scarlet put in decisively. “But it could be that this was a case of ordinary sabotage after all—due to some planted delayed-action device that our combined efforts unfortunately failed to detect.”

Commander Gregson nodded wearily. “Maybe you’re right, Captain. In a way I hope you are. I’d hate to think of a craft with the potential of the

Oceanus in the possession of the Mysterons.” He stood up and held out his hand. “Anyway, thanks for trying to help, gentlemen.”

Captain Regan walked with the Spectrum men to where their jet waited on the Naval air arm launch pad, surrounded by a strong guard. High above, the three Angel aircraft cruised, ready to resume their escort duty.

“Maybe this is none of my business, Regan,” said Scarlet as he shook hands with the security officer, “but if I were in your place I’d question that guy Jacques Berlein. He might know some answers.”

Regan stared at him. “Berlein? Are you crazy?”

Scarlet smiled cryptically. “No—but Berlein might be.” He turned and followed Captain Blue into the Spectrum jet, leaving Regan staring after him open-mouthed.

“Berlein, the Admiral’s buddy!” he muttered to himself. “Does that guy want to get me drummed out of the services?”

On the flight back, Scarlet radioed a report to Colonel White. When they reached Cloudbase, the Colonel had little to tell.

“There’s no more news of the *Oceanus X*. Seems to have vanished without trace—except for those poor fellows they fished from the water. It certainly looks like a sabotage job—although there’s an outside chance that it was hijacked in some way by a private organisation, or a hostile power such as Bereznik.”

“If it has been, we’ll soon know all about it, sir,” Scarlet said.

“Yes,” the Colonel agreed. “But that’s the Secret Service’s pigeon—not ours. You fellows had better spend an hour in the sleep room. This was a false alarm, but I’ve got a hunch that the Mysterons will really strike soon. We’ve got to be ready to hit back.”

The two captains entered the dimly-lighted Room of Sleep, set two of the dials on the main control panel to sixty minutes, and then, taking their

boots off, stretched out on the corresponding gimbals-slung couches, which adjusted to their slightest movement.

Almost instantly they fell asleep, to awaken exactly an hour later as refreshed as if they'd had a full night's undisturbed sleep. They entered the washroom, had an autoshave and a vibro-face massage, and then went along to the restaurant bay. Outside, the night sky was sprinkled with stars shining like jewels in the rarefied atmosphere.

Destiny and Rhapsody, off duty now and wearing casual clothes, were sitting at a table sipping long, cool drinks. The two men joined them, pressing buttons on the automator control to have coffee delivered to the table. But before it arrived, Lieutenant Green's voice buzzed over the intercom.

"Calling Captain Scarlet. Please report to the control room. There is a private video call for you."

Scarlet got to his feet. Destiny smiled up at him saucily.

"*Ma foi!* Not another of your lady friends, *mon cher Capitaine Scarlet?* What will the Colonel say about your giving them our video number?"

He chuckled and made his way into the corridor. But his smile faded when he remembered Destiny's words. *Mon cher Capitaine Scarlet!* Jacques Berlein had called him that! Why the blazes did that fellow keep coming into his mind?

Even so, it came as a surprise when he entered the control room to see Captain Regan on the video screen.

"I figured you were crazy," the Naval man said, "but I acted on your advice, and got the Commander's permission to question Jacques Berlein. Admiral's buddy or not, the Old Man wanted to get to the bottom of this business and he was prepared to stick his neck out to do it."

"And so?" Scarlet asked, intrigued.

“I sent a man to ask Berlein to come to my office for a little pow-wow. But the bird had flown.”

“Flown?”

“Sure. He checked out immediately the *Oceanus* was launched. Went off in his private helijet.”

“Where to?”

“That’s anybody’s guess. He’s got a villa and an undersea lab on the Riviera, some miles from Nice, and another lab on an island near Tahiti. He’s also got a chalet in the Swiss Alps not far from Berne. He could have arrived at any of them by now—but he hasn’t.”

“Have you tried contacting him by radio?”

“Sure—but if he picked up the message, he’s not biting. Just thought I’d let you know that you could be right about that guy, Captain Scarlet. I’m having a World Security call put out for him. I’ll keep in touch.”

Regan vanished from the screen and Scarlet looked at his chief.

“Think there’s anything in it, sir?”

Colonel White frowned. “I know Berlein personally, Scarlet. Met him several times in private life before I was assigned to this job. Can’t see him as a crazy saboteur. He’s not even an eccentric. Great sense of humour, fond of playing practical—even schoolboyish—jokes—but crazy, no!”

“Okay, let’s cut out sabotage, sir. Berlein’s an oceanographer, with two undersea labs. Suppose he *were* a little cracked, in spite of what you say, and coveted a vessel like the *Oceanus* to do his private exploring.”

“You mean he might have fixed it with someone to hijack the *Oceanus*?”

“Yes—and maybe the reason Regan can’t trace him is because he’s keeping a rendezvous with the hi-jackers somewhere in the Pacific. Remember, he insisted it was possible to trace the sub.”

“Confound it, Scarlet! You’re suggesting Jacques Berlein connived at or even instigated the murder of those three crewmen. You’re letting your imagination run away with you. Forget it! As I said before, it’s not *our* pigeon.”

There was a sudden burst of static from the monitor speaker on the computer, and then a haunting voice intoned: “ATTENTION, EARTHMEN! THIS IS THE VOICE OF THE MYSTERONS!”

Scarlet’s heartbeats quickened. Colonel White sat like a frozen image behind his desk, only a tiny muscle twitching on his rugged jaw betraying his tension. Lieutenant Green, his dusky face visibly paler, licked his lips as he stared expectantly at the speaker.

Then the voice continued deliberately.

“WE KNOW THAT YOU CAN HEAR US, EARTHMEN. WE HAVE SWORN TO BE AVENGED ON YOU FOR YOUR UNPROVOKED ATTACK ON OUR MARS COMPLEX. WITHIN SEVEN EARTH DAYS FROM NOW YOUR GREATEST NATION WILL BE DEVASTATED. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED—EVADE THIS JUST RETRIBUTION IF YOU CAN!”

There was another burst of static, and then silence.

The three Spectrum men looked tensely at one another.

“Well, sir,” Scarlet said, his voice a little strained. “You were right. It’s come!”

“Sure,” Colonel White sighed. “Well, at least we’ve got a few days to solve the enigma—and not a few hours as so often is the case. Lieutenant, call all personnel to a conference, please!”

“Yes, sir.”

Some minutes later, Colonel White was sitting in the conference room of the base, facing all the operative agents of his organisation, with the

exception of Melody Angel, on standby duty in the cockpit of Angel One on the flight deck.

“You all heard the warning,” he said. “This is as tough as anything we’ve had to tackle so far. First we have to confine the field of operation. Which is our greatest nation?”

“Obviously the U.S.A.,” drawled Captain Grey, who hailed from Chicago.

“Sure!” agreed Captain Ochre, a native of Detroit.

“Say, wait!” cut in the soft brogue of Captain Magenta. “Ould Ireland may be small geographically, but she’s mighty big in other ways. Where would the U.S.A. be without the O’Briens and O’Neills and O’Malleys and...”

“Now take it easy, gentlemen,” Colonel White interposed with a faint smile. “This is a discussion, not an argument. Harmony Angel!”

“Sir?” The almond-eyed beauty from Tokyo looked up with a radiant smile.

“What’s your opinion?”

“Well, sir,” she said in her musical sing-song voice. “Perhaps I ought to be tempted to say Japan—but no, I think China.”

“What about you, Doctor Fawn?”

The Spectrum medical officer laughed softly. “Well, I’d really be sticking my neck out if I said Australia, I guess. How about India?”

“And you, Captain Scarlet? If *your* patriotic feelings are running high, I suppose you’d root for Britain?”

Scarlet smiled. “No, sir. I regard myself as a citizen of the world. And from that neutral position I’d give my vote to either the U.S.A. or Russia. With all respect to Doctor Fawn, I’d cut out India—she’s part of the South Asian Federation.”

“*Ma foi!*” exclaimed Destiny Angel indignantly. “Has no one a word to say for France?”

Other voices joined in, but Colonel White raised his hand to command instant silence.

“Members of Spectrum,” he said quietly. “How do you measure greatness in a nation—as the Mysterons see it? Do they mean greatest in size, in population, in industrial or technological achievement, in culture? Or in a combination of two or more of those? My own opinion, for what it’s worth, is that the choice lies between the U.S.A., Russia and China—all still, in this seventh decade of the 21st century, nations, as distinct from sub-federations. They qualify on various grounds. I may be wrong and therefore it will be one of our primary tasks to decide which nation the Mysterons mean.”

He paused and in the silence the video recorder whirled softly.

“Our second major task will be to find out just how the Mysterons intend to devastate that nation. It could be by means of weather upheavals, catastrophic earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, destruction of crops or lines of communication, or bombardment from space. We know *nothing* is beyond them—and we know that, having declared their objective, they will not deviate from it unless compelled to do so by us.”

He stood up.

“So there we are, ladies and gentlemen. The ball has been hit into our court. Somehow we have to hit it back. That is all. We have a little grace. For the time being all we can do is to wait until they make their first move, in the hope that it will give us a clue to their objective. Everyone is on permanent red alert as from now. Thank you!”



A few hours later, when the new day's sun was gilding Cloudbase, the thermic power station near Sydney, Australia, one of seven girdling the Earth, erupted in a holocaust of flame and flying debris, devastating the coastal region for miles with the loss of hundreds of lives. In a round-the-clock video cinema in London, a direct transmission from the disaster scene was flashed on the screen.

"Scientists," said the news reporter, "are investigating a theory that the station was built over an

unsuspected volcanic reservoir which erupted without warning, releasing the tremendous reserves of power stored in the station itself."

Sitting alone in a row at the rear of the cinema, a man laughed mirthlessly.

“Fools!” he muttered. “This time, perhaps, the truth will escape them—until it is too late.”

He got up from his seat and left the cinema. As he entered the foyer, he brushed against an usherette and apologised coldly. The girl glanced at him, then shuddered and turned away, the blood draining from her pretty face.

“What’s wrong, Sue?” asked a colleague. “You look as if you’d seen a ghost.”

“I—I’m not so sure I haven’t,” Sue said hoarsely. “That fellow’s face—it—it was like something that had wandered from a graveyard. It’ll give me the creeps every time I think of it.”

But had Captain Scarlet or any of his colleagues of Spectrum seen the ashen face of the man, they would have recognised it instantly as that of Captain Black, their arch enemy and the Mysterons’ principal agent on Earth.

CHAPTER 3

Emergency Call

AN AMBER LIGHT winked on the long computer in the Cloudbase control room and Lieutenant Green glided along on his chair and stabbed a button.

A voice said: "Monitor control to Spectrum. I have an outside call for Colonel White. Will you accept it?"

Many calls were made to Spectrum every day from all over the world, just as they were to every police force, offering information, often by people hoping for a reward, sometimes by cranks seeking publicity.

But now and then a piece of useful information was gleaned and, like the world crime investigators, Spectrum could not afford to miss the slightest clue in their desperate fight against the Mysterons. Therefore, all calls picked up at the Earth-based monitor control centre were carefully filtered by experts in the hope that the residue might contain a vital grain of information.

"Who's calling?" Green asked without interest. He dealt with a dozen such calls a day and rarely did they lead to anything.

"Says his name's Jacques Berlein—"

"What?"

It was almost twelve hours since Captain Regan had made his video call from San Diego, reporting Berlein's disappearance, and Lieutenant Green, refreshed by a session in the sleep room, had almost forgotten the incident.

"In view of the fact there is a World Security tag on him," the voice went on, "I figured—"

“You figured right, brother,” Green said with rising excitement. “Put him through on video.”

“No dice, Lieutenant. It’s a sound only call, originating somewhere in reference area S.A.13. That’s as near as we can get.”

“S.A.? That’s South Atlantic. That guy’s sure gone places. Okay, put him through!”

The Lieutenant glanced round at Colonel White, who had been listening intently. The brilliant afternoon sun, sweeping down over the Atlantic towards the Americas, sent a shaft through the wide window to touch his silvery hair with gold.

“You heard that, sir?”

“Sure. Sounds interesting, although I still don’t see that Berlein can concern us. Hold him, and tell Captain Scarlet to report here at once.”

Lieutenant Green spoke into the intercom and a moment later Scarlet hurried in.

“Jacques Berlein’s calling,” the Colonel said brusquely. “Sit down and listen!”

Scarlet sat down on the stool that rose from the floor. Lieutenant Green opened the radio channel and switched on a tape recorder.

“Go ahead, Mister Berlein,” he said. “You’re through to Colonel White.”

“*M’sieu Colonel!*” The voice was agitated and a little hazed by static, but Scarlet recognised it as that of the man with whom he had spoken at San Diego. “I have something of vital importance to tell you.”

“I’m listening.”

“The *Oceanus X*—she is still in existence. While the Naval vessels search in one place—*Voila!* She is in another!”

Colonel White glanced at Scarlet and said, “You mean *you* have her, Berlein?”

“I? *Sacre bleu!* For what do you take me, Colonel—a thief? A hijacker? *Non*, I have not her, but I know where she is...”

“Well?”

“In the South Atlantic, *mon ami*. The last time I traced her, twenty minutes ago, she was moving up from Cape Horn.”

Scarlet’s interest quickened. “*How* did you trace her, M’sieu Berlein? This is Captain Scarlet speaking.”

“*Ah, oui—le Capitaine Scarlet!*” There was an eager note in Berlein’s voice. “You remember at San Diego, at the launching, I tell you that Admiral Grant is wrong when he say the *Oceanus* cannot be traced because of the secret device?”

“Sure. Go on!”

“I say that, *Capitaine*, because I have attached to the hull of the submarine a *petit* device—so *petit* that not even security checks could find her.”

“Jupiter!” Scarlet cut in. “You mean that *you* were the night intruder who knocked those guards out? You fixed a homing device to the *Oceanus!*”

“*Mais oui!* I intend this as a—how you say?—a practical joke on *mon bon ami l’Admiral*, but, alas, it seems to have misfired.”

“I’ll say it’s misfired,” growled Colonel White. “I ought to turn you over to U.S. Naval Security, Berlein—”

“But alas, *mon cher Colonel*, you have not got me to turn over, and unless I get help very quickly I am afraid there will be no more Jacques Berlein to turn over to anyone. I have been forced to crash-land in the sea and—”

“Okay, okay!” Colonel White said gruffly. “I’ll contact South Atlantic sea-air rescue. You could have called them yourself—”

“*Non, non!* This is a matter for Spectrum—”

“Why?”

“Because, *mon ami*, I have the—what you say?—the hunch. Either *Oceanus* was not destroyed but stolen by one of the unscrupulous organisations to which the World President referred—or, it was destroyed by the Mysterons.”

“You mean this vessel you were tracking could be the *Oceanus X* Mysteronised?”

“Exactly, *mon ami*.”

“But if the sub was destroyed,” put in Scarlet, “your homing device would have been destroyed too.”

“And Mysteronised, *Capitaine*. The *Oceanus* would have been reconstituted exactly as it was when launched. Even if the crew had not been Mysteronised—the *Oceanus* is fully computerised, as you know.”

Scarlet and Colonel White exchanged glances.

“He *could* be right, sir.”

“You can say that again, Captain. Captain Blue, take the passenger jet and pick him up. Captain Scarlet will accompany you. But if Berlein *is* right, the Mysterons could have ditched him—so watch out. I’ll give you an Angel escort.”

“S.I.G., sir!”

Scarlet and Blue hurried from the control room, while Lieutenant Green spoke into the intercom. “Immediate launch Angels One, Two and Three for escort duty!”

Colonel White spoke to Berlein. “Keep your channel open, Berlein. It’ll help Captain Blue to locate you.”

“Oui, oui, mon ami! I will do that. I do not like the look of these waves and there is a whale that is getting curious. If he should rise under me—”

“Okay. Keep your fingers crossed. Captains Blue and Scarlet should be with you within two hours.”

“Merci, mon ami! I shall count every minute.”

In close formation, the four Spectrum planes swept low over the grey waste of the South Atlantic. Far off to the west, the dark line of the Patagonian mountain range was just visible through the haze of distance.

“He’s drifted some,” said Captain Blue, at the controls of the passenger jet. “But his signal’s still strong.”

“Pack leader to Captain Blue,” cut in Destiny Angel over the radio. “I think there is something drifting several miles south by east!”

“S.I.G.”

Scarlet focused his binoculars through the observation panel and picked out the dark object. It was low in the water and beyond it were several others.

“Could be floating weed,” he said. “There’s a lot of it in this latitude. Let’s check on it.”

A few minutes later they knew their search was over. Low in the water, almost covered at times by the waves, floated a small silver and black helijet and, clinging to it, a slim bearded figure in a pale green zip-suit.

He waved desperately and over the radio came his relieved cry.

“Bravo, mes amis! I thought you would never find me.”

“Just hold tight, M’sieur Berlein,” Scarlet replied. “We’ll be right with you.”

While the three Angels patrolled overhead, Captain Blue brought the passenger jet down gently on the heaving surface of the sea, a short distance from the ditched helijet.

“Better take the dinghy,” Blue said. “He looks too exhausted to make it under his own steam.”

Scarlet had launched the inflatable dinghy when Blue added. “Better take this, buddy!”

Scarlet looked at the Mysteron detector that his colleague was handing to him.

“You mean...?”

“If the Mysterons ditched him, they might just as easily have killed him and Mysteronised him and the plane. Don’t want any accidents, even if you are virtually indestructible, pal.”

“Guess not.”

Scarlet took the detector, made sure his anti-Mysteron gun was loose in its thigh holster and climbed into the dinghy. The small jet motor sent it skimming over the waves to the ditched plane. As he drew closer, Scarlet focused the Mysteron detector on the figure clinging to the plane. One glance at the instantly-developed picture relieved his mind.

Near-exhausted though he was, the cheery Swiss could still raise a smile.

“*Eh bien, mon ami!*” he called hoarsely to Scarlet as the dinghy drew alongside. “You take the picture of me—to give to the newspapers, no? I wish I am more presentable.”

“Don’t worry, m’sieu,” Scarlet grinned, helping him into the dinghy. In spite of the trouble he had caused by his strange prank, Scarlet could not help liking the man, and admired his courage. “This won’t get into the papers. The camera’s a special Spectrum gadget invented by our scientists.”

“So?” The inventor in Jacques Berlein was intrigued. “What does it do, *mon ami?*”

“It takes X-ray pictures of humans and ordinary photographs of Mysterons. Simple but effective.”

Berlein looked at Scarlet shrewdly as he swung the dinghy about and sent it skimming back to the jet.

“So you think perhaps I am a Mysteron, no?”

“There was always a chance of that, Mister Berlein. We suspect the Mysterons may have caused your plane to go out of control.”

“*Parbleu!* I see what you mean, *mon ami*. It is a thought. Perhaps if I was killed all of a sudden and then Mysteronised I would not know that I was a Mysteron, eh?” He shot Scarlet a keen glance. “Am I a Mysteron, Capitaine Scarlet?”

Scarlet laughed. “No, you're in the clear.”

“*Ma foi!*” Berlein grimaced comically. “What a relief! To know that I am not dead, I mean. There are so many things I want to do and see before then.”

Scarlet helped him aboard and the jet took off.

“Where do you take me?” Berlein asked, as Scarlet got him hot black coffee from the auto dispenser.

“Back to Cloudbase. The Colonel would like a chat with you, m’sieu.”

Berlein shook his head emphatically. “No, not back to Cloudbase—yet! You forget the *Oceanus*. We must try to find it again, *mon ami*.” He took a small flat gadget with a rotating dial from inside his zip suit. “See, I still have my detector! It was the only thing I thought to rescue when the water began to seep into the plane cabin.”

“That’s an idea,” Scarlet said. He switched on his radio and his cap microphone swung down. “Captain Scarlet to Cloudbase control,” he said. “Put me through to Colonel White.”

His epaulettes flashed white and the Colonel's voice filled his ears. "Come in, Scarlet. Mission completed successfully, so I understand from Destiny Angel."

"Yes, sir. But M'sieu Berlein suggests we try to trace the *Oceanus* before we return."

"I've already alerted the World Navy; they've got aircraft, surface and underwater vessels converging on the area now. So far they've found no trace of the *Oceanus*."

"Guess they wouldn't if that screening device is still effective. But M'sieu Berlein thinks maybe he can pick up the impulses from his homing device on the hull—if it's still functioning, that is."

"S.I.G. Go ahead, Scarlet. If you do find it, we'll get the Navy to blow it out of the water—drop enough depth charges to sink a battle fleet if necessary. It may *not* be Mysteronised, of course, but we'll take no chances. Anyone on it has outlawed themselves anyway, and there is more than their lives at stake."

"S.I.G., sir."

As the Spectrum planes screamed towards the distant coast, Jacques Berlein explained.

"The *Oceanus* was just crossing the forty-fifth parallel when I lost track of her. I was circling, trying to pick her up again when—*voila!* My plane, she goes out of control."

"So your homing device must have failed," Scarlet suggested.

Berlein shrugged. "I do not know. It happened before."

"It did? Where?"

"In the Pacific! I did not have time to tell Colonel White the whole story. He was a leetle impatient with me, and I too was getting very anxious about the waves. But it was like this..."

“When I leave San Diego after the launching, I fly to my ocean laboratory near Tahiti. I did not have the detector on me, you understand, because with all the stringent security precautions I was afraid it would be discovered.”

“You can bet your life it would have been, m’sieu,” Blue interrupted. “They had electronic eyes everywhere. You couldn’t have smuggled in a cat’s whisker let alone a gadget like that.”

“Too bad they didn’t have thought-reading machines too,” Scarlet said bluntly.

Stroking his trim little beard, Berlein regarded him reproachfully.

“Alas, *Capitaine*. You are still thinking that I behave stupidly. *Eh bien!* I confess to it. But remember—if the *Oceanus* has been Mysteronised, you may yet have cause to be grateful for my stupidity.”

“That’s a thought,” Scarlet said. “Go on, m’sieu. You were on your way to your sea lab at Tahiti. That’s all of three thousand five hundred miles from San Diego. I don’t know how fast that helijet was.”

“It could attain two thousand miles an hour, *mon ami*. But I merely cruised. There was no hurry, you see. The *Oceanus* was going to be on trial for a month without surfacing. It was the point of my little joke on the Admiral that I was going to keep track of her and let him know from time to time just where she was, you understand?”

“Sure, I understand, m’sieu.”

Scarlet smiled thinly. He could certainly see the point of Berlein’s intended joke. He could imagine the Admiral’s face as he heard his friend reporting just where the top secret submarine was, possibly even before the information had been received from the vessel itself.

“But, before I reached Tahiti,” went on Berlein, “I hear radio reports of the disaster. I can think of it as nothing but a disaster when I learn what has

happened to the poor unfortunates who were manning her. I hear of the fruitless search and I proceed at top speed to my laboratory. I think that perhaps my homing device she is still working down there in the ocean somewhere and that, with the detector, I can find the wreckage.”

Scarlet nodded. He didn’t doubt that the Swiss scientist was telling the simple truth. His little joke having sadly misfired, he had been anxious to turn his invention to serious use.

“So I get the detector and I take off for the disaster area. It is a long way. Even at top speed it will take me at least an hour, and then...”

“Yes. m’sieu?”

“I pick up the impulses from the homing device. There can be no mistake and yet—this spot is a thousand miles south-west of the disaster point!”

“So you knew the *Oceanus* wasn’t destroyed and was travelling mighty fast,” put in Captain Blue, looking round from the controls.

“*Parbleu, mon ami!*” Berlein spread his hands. “I know that the homing device cannot travel like that alone. And so I tell myself something strange has happened—and I can think of only one thing.”

“That the sub had been Mysteronised.”

“*Non, non, Capitaine Scarlet.* I assume that she has been stolen—given the hi-jack by one of the unscrupulous organisations or hostile powers of which Monsieur le World President speaks. Bereznik for instance. What would their rulers not give to have a vessel like the *Oceanus*. That is what I think, *mes amis*. So I decide to follow her, to track her to their lair—and then call the World Navy to it.”

“You could have called the Navy right away, m’sieu,” Scarlet said dryly.

Berlein nodded. “I think of it, but then I think—suppose the miscreants pick up the message and are warned? So, in my bad wisdom, I continue to

track the *Oceanus*. She is travelling at seven hundred knots.”

“That’s the sub’s maximum speed,” said Captain Blue.

“Exactly. They were in the—how you say?—the almighty hurry to get some place, no?”

“Sure seems like it,” agreed Scarlet. “But what about the time when the homing device seemed to fail, M’sieu Berlein?”

The Swiss gestured impatiently.

“I come to that. We are approaching New Caledonia when it happens. One moment there are impulses registering on this detector—the next moment—pouf! There is nothing!”

“But you obviously picked them up again, and tracked them round the Horn. Where and how and when?”

“It was about three hours later. I had been flying round in circles, vainly trying to find the submarine, when suddenly I receive an impulse. This time it is near New Zealand almost a thousand miles south from me—almost the limit of the impulse range. I give chase again and overtake the *Oceanus*. It is travelling still at maximum speed and heading south by east.” He shrugged. “The rest you know, *mes amis*.”

“When did it first occur to you that the Mysterons might have taken over the *Oceanus*?” Scarlet asked.

“*Tiens!* It came to me like a flash out of the blue as my plane hits the water. You know how thoughts come from nowhere—*mon dieu!*” He clapped a hand to his brow.

“What’s wrong now?” asked Scarlet.

The lean, bearded face of the Swiss had drained of colour.

“Another thought has just struck me, *Capitaine*. It was while I had lost track of the *Oceanus* that the thermic power station at Sydney blew up. I heard the radio reports, but did not connect it. They said it was due to a

volcanic eruption—a natural disaster. And of course I believe then that the *Oceanus* had been seized by pirates. But now...”

Scarlet’s jaw tightened. He looked at Captain Blue.

“He could have hit on something,” he said.

“You’re telling me,” Blue said grimly. “Better report to the Colonel.”

Scarlet was already pulling down his cap microphone. Through the observation panel, the ragged coast was very close now and the planes were wheeling north parallel to it.

“Guess you’d better switch on that detector, m’sieu,” Captain Blue told Berlein. “The *Oceanus* has got over a couple of hours start on us, but we’ll soon be within range.”

The Swiss nodded dumbly and switched on the device.

Scarlet’s epaulettes flashed white as the Spectrum chief came through. He briefly reported what Berlein had told him.

“By glory!” the Colonel exclaimed. “He could be right. It seems mighty strange that the sub should have been in that area at the crucial period. You’ve got to find her, Scarlet, and find her fast. Whatever the Mysterons’ game is—we’ve got to try to destroy that sub.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

The four craft hurtled above the Argentinian coastline at a thousand feet. Twenty minutes later they were screaming over the Plate estuary, the towering white buildings of modern Buenos Aires and Montevideo gleaming in the afternoon sun beyond their shimmering beaches.

Ten minutes later, the Uruguayan coast already receding behind them, Berlein exclaimed: “Listen, *mes amis!*” From the detector which he held on his knees came a pulsating bleeping sound.

“The *Oceanus!*” he said eagerly. “She is not seven hundred miles ahead of us.”

Captain Blue consulted his map. “She must be almost at Rio de Janeiro. She’s...”

He broke off, staring ahead. From far beyond the horizon, flame was gouting skywards, temporarily dimming even the glare of the tropical sun.

“*Mon dieu!*” gasped Jacques Berlein. “Never have I seen an explosion like that!”

Dense smoke was now rising swiftly. Scarlet spoke into his microphone, his throat tight with apprehension.

“Flight reduce speed to cruising.”

As their speed slackened, he got through to Cloudbase. “Something’s happened down here, sir,” he reported. “There was a tremendous explosion on the route we believe the *Oceanus* was taking.”

“Hold it, Captain!” Colonel White cut in. “There’s an emergency flash from World Security—*Jupiter!*”

“What is it, sir?” Scarlet asked hoarsely.

“The thermic power station outside Rio has blown up!”

CHAPTER 4

Terror by Night

THE SPECTRUM PLANES circled above the scene of devastation. It covered scores of square miles between the coast and the foothills north of Rio, and the blast had smashed every pane of glass in the towering white buildings of the city itself.

A pall of steam hung over the coastal strip. The force of the colossal explosion had thrust back the ocean waters—just as they often receded before a volcanic upheaval. Then they had come rushing back in a huge tidal wave, to surge over the blazing ruins of the power station and the coastal villas, the motels and the boatels, quenching the countless fires, but adding to the death toll by drowning hundreds who had been injured by the killer blast or had miraculously escaped.

Captain Blue contacted Cloudbase, and Colonel White drummed out instructions.

“You’d better get down there and see if there is anything you can do... Any trace of the *Oceanus*?”

“No, sir. Berlein’s detector has picked up no signal since the explosion, but it might start operating again—unless the sub’s out of range already.”

“Transfer the detector to Destiny Angel by air to air contact. The Angels will link up with world Naval aircraft converging on the area and assist in the search for the *Oceanus*.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

Berlein made no protest about parting with his treasured gadget.

“It is in a vital cause, *mon ami*,” he said, with a wry smile.

The Spectrum jet flew close to Destiny's plane and the detector was transferred by means of the hydraulic arm. Then the strike craft wheeled and sped off over the sea. Captain Blue, bringing the passenger jet slowly down through the wreathing mist of steam and smoke, landed it beside a wide debris-littered motorway, flanked by flattened villas and motels.

Scarlet reported to Colonel White that he and Blue were about to leave the 'plane.

"S.I.G. Keep your eyes skinned. Maybe you can spot something that will definitely connect this terrible business with the Mysterons. So far we have no real proof. Berlein's original hunch—that the sub was hi-jacked by a pirate organisation—might be right. We don't want to get involved in a wild goose chase."

"If pirates did this, sir," Scarlet said grimly, "it's the most wanton act of destruction I've ever seen. At least old time pirates would have landed and sacked the ruins—although it looks as if there's precious little left to sack here."

"I'm checking with the U.S. Navy top brass to see if I can find out just what secret equipment the *Oceanus* was carrying—anything that could have been used to blow up those two power stations."

"That's an idea, sir. I don't think an ordinary submarine contact missile could have done it."

Leaving Berlein in the plane, Captains Scarlet and Blue walked up the road towards the power station, picking their way through the debris. Rescue squads were already busy searching for survivors, and they saw a heli-ambulance take off.

A few minutes later, a big silver and green helijet, bearing the Brazilian national emblem on its nose, whirled low above them and vanished into the smog of steam and smoke ahead.

“See the markings?” asked Blue. “Guess that’s the Brazilian senator’s personal jet.”

“Señor Fernandes? He must have left Brasilia the moment he received news of the disaster.”

They had left the last of the wrecked villas behind them when the smoking ruins of the power station came into sight.

The massive plasti-concrete wall that had surrounded it had been flattened like a frail fence by a gale. Miraculously, one of the high skeleton towers that beamed power all over the South American continent had survived, although it was now lurching at a crazy angle. The buildings were mere heaps of smoking rubble, with a few metal girders sticking from them like accusing fingers.

Rescue workers in anti-radiation suits were ferreting among the ruins.

Outside the perimeter of the flattened wall, the senator’s helijet was grounded. Beside it was a group of swarthy-faced men, some of them in uniform. A little apart from the others, mopping his bearded face with a silk handkerchief as he stared grimly at the scene of destruction, was a heavily-built dignified man, whom Scarlet recognised as the World Senator for Brazil.

His shocked face lit up with interest at the sight of their uniforms.

“Ah, Spectrum! To what do we owe this unexpected visit, señors?” His eyes narrowed shrewdly as if a thought had just occurred to him. “Is this,”—he waved a hand at the devastation about them—“is this the work of the Mysterons?”

“That we cannot say as yet, Señor,” Scarlet said guardedly. “And we would appreciate it if you would, for the moment, allow no word of suspicion to get out.”

“No, no, of course not! I will insist on strict security for the time being. This catastrophe is appalling enough without adding panic.”

He turned to a man in the white and blue uniform of a high-ranking police officer, who was now joining them, and spoke a few words rapidly in Portuguese.

The officer saluted. “I will see to it, señor.”

He came forward and held out his hand to Scarlet. “Captain Scarlet, I presume,” he said in perfect English. “It is an honour to meet you. I am Police Commandant Rodrigues. If there is anything I can do...”

“Is there any official here who can tell us about the setup of the thermic station, Commandant?”

“Yes, there is our state controller of power—Señor d’Oliviera. I will call him.”

A stocky, middle-aged man with a thin moustache joined them.

“As you are aware, Captain,” he said, when Scarlet explained what he wanted to know, “the source of the power is the heat at the centre of the Earth itself. It is tapped by a shaft at the main station in the Nevada Desert and fed in the form of energy waves to six sub-stations stationed about the world. Copenhagen, Nanking, Cape Town, Bombay, Sydney. Ah, I forget. There *were* six stations. Now Sydney and my own station are, alas, no more.”

“Each of these regional stations serves or served a vast area?”

“Yes. Copenhagen—the whole of Europe and Northern Asia; Nanking—the Far East; Cape Town—Africa; Bombay—the South Asian Federation and the Indian Ocean; Sydney—Australasia and Oceania; and—” he sighed, “—what was once the pride of my heart—South America and a few groups of islands like the Falklands and some of the Antarctic research stations.”

“The mother station in Nevada serves the U.S.A. and Canada?”

“Of course, Captain. It is a remarkable system, yet relatively simple. It has enabled us to dispense with innumerable tiny stations scattered about the world—a most wasteful system that grew up piecemeal in the last century—and to dispense with such wasteful forms of power, heat and light as gas and oil, the reserves of which were fast becoming exhausted. We have dispensed with solar power also. There were certain disadvantages about that which do not exist with our Earth energy system.”

He fell silent as two ambulance men came past with a still form on a stretcher.

“But now the system is two stations short, señor, what happens?” Scarlet asked.

Señor d’Oliviera shrugged. “Automatically, the energy that was being beamed to them is split between the others, and they will continue to relay it to the affected regions until new stations are built, which will take some time, of course.”

“How long?”

“A month, maybe—maybe less.”

“No risk of those other stations being overloaded?”

“No. Captain. All is taken care of by computers at the Nevada station. The system is as foolproof as human technology can contrive.” He smiled wryly and gestured at the ruins. “It has to be—you see what can happen if something goes wrong.”

“Any idea what went wrong here, señor?”

The controller spread his hands. “Without a thorough investigation it is not possible to say at the moment, Captain. I can think off hand of only *one* thing that would cause a station to explode—being fed more energy than it could handle. It would build up to a critical point and then—*Pouf!* We have

what you see around us.” He shook his head. “But it is inconceivable. I do not see how such a thing could happen.”

“Isn’t there anyone here who could give us a clue, señor?”

“Alas, no! There was a minimum staff, fortunately. You see, computers did most of the work. Señor Vasco might have been able to throw some light on the mystery.”

“Vasco? Who’s he?”

“The resident director. But alas, we shall never be able to ask him—”

He broke off, staring incredulously beyond Scarlet and Blue towards the power station ruins, his jaw sagging. “*Santos mio!*” he gasped.

They swung. Coming through the drifting smoke and steam from the direction of the ruins, was a man in an overall suit that had once been white, but was now stained and begrimed.

“What’s the matter, señor?” Scarlet asked the controller.

“That—that *is* Vasco! It is a miracle that he should be alive.”

He dashed forward and grasped the man’s shoulders, gabbling excitedly at him in Portuguese, then began to lead him back to the Spectrum men.

“Gee, that guy must be immortal or something! How could anyone be caught in the middle of *that* and still be alive, let alone walk.”

Captain Blue broke off, staring at Scarlet, who was swaying slightly.

“What’s the matter, pal?”

“I feel kind of dizzy.”

“These fumes...”

“No!” Scarlet shook his head as if to clear it “It’s that feeling I get when—Blue, there’s a Mysteron around. Your detector—quick!”

As Captain Blue unhooked the detector from his belt, the man Vasco dragged his arm from Señor d’Oliviera’s grasp and stepped back, staring with cold eyes at the two Spectrum agents.

“It’s *him!*” Scarlet jerked out. “No wonder he could survive that explosion. He’s a Mysteron agent!”

At the words, Vasco turned and ran.

“After him!” cried Scarlet, starting in pursuit, drawing his anti-Mysteron gun, Blue at his heels.

The Mysteron agent darted into the ruins. They pounded after him. A shot blasted through the smog and a missile thunked into a broken wall not a foot from Scarlet’s head.

He ducked behind a heap of rubble, peering out. The smog wreathed away and he saw the Mysteron peering out from behind a slab of masonry some thirty feet away—well within the fifty-yard range of the anti-Mysteron gun.

He took aim carefully. The gun discharged a high voltage electricity charge—it was the only weapon that Spectrum had found that would destroy a Mysteron.

But before he could fire, the Mysteron had vanished. Captain Blue joined him and they crept through the rubble. Systematically they searched. Scarlet still had that dizzy feeling. The Mysteron was not far away.

Suddenly he heard some rubble trickle down behind him, and swung about.

The Mysteron had appeared from above a heap of rubble and was aiming his gun at Blue’s back. There was no time for Scarlet to fire. He flung himself forward so that his body screened his colleague. The gun in the Mysteron’s hand flamed and an explosive missile struck Scarlet in the shoulder.

With a groan, he sank to the ground.

Captain Blue, already turning, saw the Mysteron preparing to take another shot at him. He triggered his anti-Mysteron gun. A thin ray stabbed

out. Blue-white light crackled about the Mysteron and with a strangled gasp he crumpled and sprawled headlong over the rubble.

Blue went down on one knee beside Scarlet, turned him gently over. Scarlet's eyes were glazed with pain and where his tunic was rent by the explosive bullet it was being stained a deeper red.

"*Paul!*" Blue swallowed. Only in moments of great stress did any member of Spectrum break instructions and refer to a colleague by his real name. "You—you saved my life. That bullet was intended for me."

Scarlet forced a grin. "Well, don't get so emotional about it, Adam. I'm indestructible—you're not. And Spectrum can't afford to lose you. Just—just get me back to the jet. Doc Fawn will have to patch me up..."

His voice trailed off and he slumped back, unconscious. Commander Rodrigues came running up. He glanced at the dead Mysteron. "What is wrong?" he gasped. "Why do you kill Señor Vasco?"

"Because he *wasn't* Señor Vasco," Blue said grimly. "At least, not any more!"

"You mean—he was Mysteronised?"

"Sure. But keep it quiet until you get the okay from Spectrum. Give me a hand with my buddy. I've got to get him back to base as fast as I can."

The commandant signalled to some rescue workers who had come on the scene. The unconscious Scarlet was given temporary first aid to stop the bleeding and then carried to a small hover ambulance unit, which sped along the road to the jet.

Blue made Scarlet comfortable in the plane and took off through the rapidly thinning pall of steam and smoke. It was only when the jet was screaming north by east over the grey-blue waste of the Atlantic that he remembered Berlein. Why hadn't the Swiss remained in the plane?

“Well, I haven’t got time to go back and look for him,” Blue thought. “He can’t come to any harm back there. If the Colonel wants him, he can detail someone to pick him up later.”

Meanwhile he had to get Scarlet to Cloudbase as quickly as possible.

“I’m scared that one of these times that retrometabolism’s not gonna work,” he muttered grimly.

• • •

Captain Scarlet sat up on the stretcher trolley in the Cloudbase hospital and grinned cheerfully at Doctor Fawn and Captain Blue.

“Hiya, fellers! Nice to be back.”

Doctor Fawn smiled. “You bounce back to life like a rubber ball, Captain. No pain?”

Scarlet slapped his shoulder. “None. I could go ten rounds with the world champ right now.”

Fawn shook his head. “If only we could acquire the secret of retrometabolism—the misery we could save!”

“You’d have world population problems on your hands then, Doc, with nobody ever dying,” Captain Blue said dryly. He grinned at Scarlet. “Come along, buddy! A cup of coffee, a new tunic—and then the Old Man wants to see us.”

Several minutes later they were sitting before the Spectrum chief’s desk in the control room. It was night again outside—three solar hours east of Rio.

“The pattern’s becoming clearer,” the Colonel said. “The discovery of a Mysteron agent at the Rio station seems to settle two things—first, that this is a Mysteron operation; second, that to engineer an explosion they must have an agent inside a station.”

“Did you find out from the U.S. Navy whether there was anything in the *Oceanus*’s equipment that could be used to cause the explosions, sir?” asked Scarlet.

“I was coming to that. They were a bit cagey, but I threatened them with an overriding order from the World President and they came through with what we wanted. As you know, the sub is run entirely by computers. The three-man crew were only necessary to programme it. The Mysterons, with their powers, have no need for a crew to do even that. When they have selected their target, the *Oceanus* will home on it inexorably with the result that we have already seen—twice within twelve hours.”

“You think they’ll strike again?” asked Blue.

“I’m certain of it, Captain. For the moment I don’t see how this ties up with their threat to devastate our greatest nation. But the pattern must be there somewhere, if we can find it. Meanwhile, we’ve got to trace that sub and destroy it. They may have an auxiliary plan prepared, as they usually do, which they’ll put into operation if this one fails—but at least we will have removed this immediate threat.”

“There’s been no trace of the *Oceanus* since the Rio explosion, sir?” asked Scarlet.

“None—and that was over three hours ago. Normal tracking methods are useless against the sub’s screening devices. Our only hope was that from the air it might be spotted in shallow water—or that Berlein’s detector would locate it. But either the detector’s defective or the homing device isn’t working.”

“Maybe the Mysterons knew about Berlein’s device, sir, and have neutralised it.”

Colonel White frowned. “Then why didn’t they neutralise it before?”

“But maybe they *did*,” Scarlet went on eagerly. “It would account for Berlein losing track of the sub off Australia—for the very period when the Sydney thermic station blew up.”

The Colonel smacked his fist into the palm of his other hand.

“You could have hit on something there, Captain. Maybe they let Berlein pick up the sub again, so he could track it round to Rio. It’s beginning to add up. It’s the sort of tantalising trail they would leave for us—challenging us to work the rest out for ourselves. That looks as though Berlein’s plane ditching was an accident after all.”

“But it brings us back to the problem of just where they will strike next, sir,” put in Captain Blue.

“Well, we can take our choice from four stations. Nevada’s out—the sub can’t reach the middle of a desert.” The Colonel glanced at an illuminated chart of the world’s oceans. “Sydney... Rio... *If* the sub’s moving eastwards round the world, it’ll be Cape Town next. That’s nearly four thousand miles from Rio. At maximum speed the *Oceanus* could make it in around four and a half hours.”

“So the next deadline could be about ninety minutes from now, sir.”

“Sure. We’ll take no chances. Lieutenant Green!”

“Sir?”

“Contact all South African agents. Have them converge on the Cape Town thermic station. Who’s our operative down there?”

“Lieutenant Violet, sir.”

“Tell him to take charge of operations. The thermic station personnel must be vetted. One of them may be a Mysteron agent. He must be destroyed and the station searched for an alien device.”

“I will see to it, sir.”

“Contact World Navy headquarters and ask them to throw a protective screen along the ocean approaches to the station—underwater, surface and air craft—and take whatever measures they think fit to prevent that sub getting close enough to trigger off an explosion in the station.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And recall the Angels. If we’re barking up the wrong tree, we may need them elsewhere.”

As Lieutenant Green slid his seat along the front of the computer bank, Captain Blue thought for a while then suddenly inquired: “By the way, Colonel, what happened to Berlein? Did anyone pick him up at Rio?”

“No. He left of his own accord. Hitched a lift on an ambulance to Rio and chartered a plane. Since then we’ve lost track of him. There were some questions I wanted to ask.”

“Excuse me, sir,” Lieutenant Green cut in from the computer. “There’s a call coming through via monitor control—from Berlein. Video call this time.”

Colonel White smiled tightly. “Put him through, Lieutenant.”

The lean, bearded face of the Swiss appeared on the video screen.

“Where are you, Berlein?” demanded White.

“At my laboratory workshop in the Swiss Alps, *Colonel*.”

“My, how that guy sure does get around,” murmured Captain Blue.

“You might have informed me of your movements, Berlein,” said the Colonel.

“*Oui, oui!* I am regrettable, *mon ami*. But I get the idea and it makes me so excitable.”

“What idea?”

“About another invention of mine—another detector, so much more powerful than the one I give your Mam'selle Destiny. I think, perhaps, I can

trace the *Oceanus*. Maybe, if my theory is sound, I can stop her from a distance. It is a gamble, but— If you could send one of your men, *oui*? To impart the information over the open air might be inadvisable, *non*?”

Colonel White frowned. “Perhaps you’re right, Berlein. I’ll have a man with you in half an hour. Where is your laboratory?”

“No matter. Tell him to land at Berne Airport. I will meet him there thirty minutes from now. *Au revoir, mon ami*.”

Berlein vanished from the screen, and Colonel White addressed his two captains.

“Another chore for you, Captain Scarlet. There may be nothing in this, but his portable detector *did* work up to a point—certainly it made those U.S. Navy claims about the *Oceanus* being undetectable look a little sick. Captain Grey will pilot you.”

Captain Blue looked disappointed, and the Colonel added, “Sorry Captain. I need you here. Trouble may strike anywhere—and I want you on hand. Off you go, Scarlet. With the Angels on their way back you’ll have to manage without an escort.”

Scarlet grinned as he rose from his stool.

“Wouldn’t be the first time, I guess, sir.”

In a derelict hut on a dark Swiss mountainside, above the snowline retreating before the approach of spring, Captain Black switched off a portable radio receiver and his thin lips twisted in a sinister smile.

“So we shall meet again, Captain Scarlet,” he murmured. “This time the outcome may not be so favourable to you.”

Higher up the mountainside, Jacques Berlein took a last look around his laboratory workshop, built into the rock of the slope. It was crammed with weird-looking clocks, mechanical toys, clockwork and electronic gadgets.

“I shall be back in an hour, Alphonse!” he said, turning to a larger-than-life-sized humanoid robot.

“*An hour!*” intoned the robot in a metallic voice.

“Admit no one until I return, Alphonse!”

“*Admit no one.*”

Berlein patted the robot on the shoulder, and went through into the chalet overlooking the moonlit valley. He put a top coat over his overalls, clamped a hat on his head and went out on to the verandah. The door locked automatically behind him.

A few moments later he was driving a powerful car down the valley road to where, far below, the lights of Berne twinkled in the darkness. Berlein hummed cheerfully as he drove, unaware of the cold, dark, cynical eyes of Captain Black, which watched him pass.

He knew every inch of the road and drove with his usual fearlessness, taking treacherous corners in a way that would have brought terror to the heart of many a brave man, even in the daytime. A mile down the valley, the narrow road angled sharply to run above a sheer slope into a deep ravine.

This was one hazard of this mountain road that even Berlein respected. He started to slow down when the warning sign appeared in the glare of his headlights.

Then, suddenly, fear stabbed through him.

“*Ma foi!*” he gasped. “What is wrong? It does not respond.”

Frantically he grabbed at his handbrake, but it had no effect.

His throat tight, he concentrated on the road ahead. Cutting the engine would not help him with the car freewheeling at this speed. His only hope was to trust to his skill to get him round that suicide bend.

His heart thudded, sending the blood pounding into his ears. Cold sweat beaded on his face.

Ten yards... five... three... two... one... *Now!*

With wrists of steel he swung the wheel hard over. It spun in his hands like a top.

“Mon dieu!”

His terrified scream rose into the night—and then the car, its steering useless, hurtled over the edge of the road and plunged down into the ravine, flinging Berlein from it. They landed together on a jumble of rocks that protruded from the snow-filled bottom of the ravine. The car rolled over, crushing the already dead Berlein, then burst into flames.

When the flames had died down, ghostly green circles of light spiralled down out of the night sky to touch the charred wreck. Ten minutes later, an identical car hurtled through a small Swiss hamlet on the lower slopes, causing the local gendarme to leap hastily aside.

He caught a glimpse of the man behind the wheel in the light of the inn, and shook his head with a tolerant smile.

“Ah oui! That imbecile M’sieu Berlein as usual. One of these fine nights he will kill himself!”

CHAPTER 5

Berserk Robot

IT WAS AN HOUR to midnight when Captain Scarlet touched down at Berne Airport in the Spectrum jet.

“Thanks, pal,” he said cheerfully as he took leave of Captain Grey. “Sorry I can’t tip you—no small change.”

“That’s okay,” the dark-haired American replied, touching the peak of his cap with mock deference. “We know you Limeys are either tight-wads or flat broke. Shall I wait?”

“Don’t bother, my good man. I’ll radio if I need you.”

Grey laughed. “Okay. Be seeing you. Keep your eyes skinned for Mysterons. If they know we’ve got our noses to the trail, it’ll be sprinkled with red herrings from now on.”

“I’ve got a taste for red herrings—and a built-in Mysteron detector, remember?”

“Sure—but don’t forget it doesn’t *always* work!”

“Maybe, but the odds against it failing are remote. So long—be seeing you!”

As Scarlet approached the control buildings which raised their lofty towers against the moonlit backcloth of the snowy mountains, a bearded figure in a hat and top coat came forward into the light of the arc lamps.

“*Ah, mon cher Capitaine Scarlet!* So the Colonel has sent *you!* I am so happy.”

“*Bon soir, M’sieur Berlein!*” said Scarlet, taking the hand extended to him. “Say, you’re like ice!”

“*Mais, oui!* It is a cold night, *mon ami!*” The Mysteronised Swiss regarded him with an amused glint in his dark eyes. He took Scarlet’s arm. “*Allons!* I have my car here. It will not take us long to reach the chalet.”

Not suspecting that his companion was now a Mysteron agent, Scarlet slid into the front seat of the car beside him. As Captain Grey had reminded him, there were rare occasions when Scarlet’s strange sixth sense mysteriously deserted him. How and why it did so he had never discovered. But this was one of those occasions, and he was to regret it bitterly that night.

The Mysteron drove out of town at a breakneck speed and sent the powerful car charging up the narrow mountain road. Scarlet gulped and mentally consigned himself to the lap of the gods. He felt safer in the Spectrum jet at three thousand miles an hour than he did in this car. For when a human was Mysteronised, he retained all his human characteristics. Thus Jacques Berlein the Mysteron was as reckless a driver as his human predecessor.

Soon the lights of the town were far below them and frost was riming the windscreen, kept at bay by the de-icers.

“Just what is this new invention of yours, m’sieur?” Scarlet asked, after a time.

The Mysteron, having Berlein’s mind, knew what Scarlet was talking about.

“She is a super detector, *mon ami*. The principle is the same as the portable one which you see today—but she is much bigger and she is powered by the special generator which I have constructed in my laboratory workshop. By utilising communication satellite networks, I can pick up impulses from anywhere in the world.”

“And from underwater sources?”

“*Mais oui!* It is sonic waves that she picks up as well as the electromagnetic.”

“And you think you can trace the *Oceanus*?”

“That we shall see, *mon ami!*”

“But...”

Scarlet held his breath and gripped the door as his companion swung the speeding car round a hairpin bend. It skidded on a patch of black ice, then miraculously straightened out and charged at another gradient.

“You were going to say, *Capitaine*—before I take your breath away?” There was amusement in the Mysteron’s voice, just as there would have been in Berlein’s.

“What if your homing device on the *Oceanus* isn’t working? We suspect the Mysterons may know about it and are switching it on and off just to...”

“Tantalise Spectrum?”

“Something like that.”

“*Eh bien!* It matters not if the device is not working, *mon ami*. That is the point of my super detector. I know that the shell of the *Oceanus* is an alloy that contains a very rare man-made metal that has never before been used in an underwater vessel. As you know, all substances have their own vibration wavelength. So, if I can detect the presence of a considerable quantity of this metal in any part of the ocean—*Voilà!*”

“That should indicate the whereabouts of the sub?”

“Precisely, *mon ami*.”

They were climbing high now, zigzagging across a pine-clad slope to which snow still clung. The moon was hidden by the tall trees, and the headlights picked out the narrow, snaking road.

Presently they emerged from the pines and to the left the mountainside dropped away sheerly. Far below, the moonlight gleamed on what looked

like a river of silver, issuing from the darkness of a ravine mouth. But it was a river that seemed to have no movement.

“What’s that down there?” Scarlet asked.

“A glacier, *mon ami*. It is said that unfortunate mountaineers who fall into it are never seen again—at least for fifty years!”

“Fifty years? But why?”

Suddenly Scarlet stiffened. That dizzy feeling! For a moment he wondered if it was the high altitude that was inducing the sensation.

But never before had he suffered from mountain sickness—they were not all that high, anyway. No, there was only one explanation. The man beside him was not Berlein—but a Mysteron. His mysterious sixth sense had not been operating until now.

He slid his hand down to his anti-Mysteron gun. To use it at this speed would be to risk the car plunging off the narrow road into the glacier abyss. With an effort he kept his voice steady.

“Stop a moment, m’sieu! I’d like to take a closer look at the glacier.”

The Mysteron laughed coldly. “And so you shall, Captain Scarlet!”

Suddenly he swung the wheel towards the edge of the road.

With a startled yell, Scarlet grabbed for it. The Mysteronised Berlein, transformed now into a demon, fought him off. The car swayed back and forth across the narrow, frosty road.

“In the glacier even you, Captain Scarlet, could not survive!” the Mysteron taunted.

He thrust at Scarlet with a vicious elbow and wrenched the wheel over again. With a screeching of tortured tyres, the car swerved violently, hit a boulder at the side of the road, bounced off and then hurtled over the precipice.



As it turned over, Scarlet was flung out. The icy air snatched his breath away. He felt himself tumbling over and over. Nausea hit his stomach.

Then something struck him in the ribs with numbing shock, branches clawed at his face. Instinctively he grabbed at the stunted and twisted pine. The sudden check to his fall nearly dragged his arms from their sockets. Dazed and winded, he clung desperately to this pathetic little growth, that by some miracle had found a roothold

in a crevice in the wall of the abyss, while the car and the being who had once been Berlein hurtled down to oblivion on the glacier far below.

"Au revoir, m'sieu!" he murmured. "At least now you will be free—not condemned to slavery as a non-human."

Scarlet got his legs about the spindly trunk of the tree. It sagged under his weight, but the rothold seemed secure.

He looked up. In the moonlight he estimated that the edge of the precipice was some fifty feet above him. Dimly he could make out other stunted vegetation clinging to the rock wall. There would be other crevices—footholds and handholds. But there would also be ice.

He wondered how often a vehicle came along this lonely road, if in fact it led anywhere but to Berlein's lonely chalet. Who would hear him if he called? His cap was gone, otherwise a radio call to Cloudbase would have brought the jet.

Gritting his teeth, he began to climb, inch by inch, foot by foot, groping with fast-numbing fingers for each life-giving handhold. Twice he slipped and almost gave himself up for lost, but each time there was some tough dwarf of a bush for him to clutch.

It seemed an eternity before at last he hauled himself stiffly over the edge and sprawled panting on the coarse, snow-sprinkled grass at the side of the road. But when he looked at his watch, he saw that scarcely half an hour had elapsed since they had driven through the pine wood. He checked on his equipment. The Mysteron detector had gone, but his anti-Mysteron gun was still in its holster. That was some consolation.

After a few minutes, his strength restored, he got to his feet and looked about him. To his right, the road twisted down into the pines. To his left, it swung about a high shoulder of rock, over which he got a glimpse of a light through the branches of another small stand of pines.

Berlein's chalet? What else could that light be from? And in the workshop laboratory behind the chalet was the detector that the Mysteronised Berlein had been describing.

Scarlet didn't doubt that what he had been told about the detector was true, for the Mysteron could only speak of facts known to the mind of the human he had once been. He must find that detector and try to operate it.

Crossing the road to the inner edge, he started up it, keeping as much as possible to the shallow snow drift at the foot of the slope to deaden the sound of his footsteps, which would echo sharply on the frozen surface of the road in the icy air. He did this instinctively, as if he was wary of human adversaries ahead of him. Yet deep down he knew that such a precaution was probably useless if there were other Mysteron agents up here on the mountainside. The Mysterons had superhuman senses.

As so often when engaged in that ceaseless fight against them, he had an uncanny feeling that he was being watched by unseen eyes—eyes that mocked him, the minds behind them cynically wondering whether he would be able to negotiate the snares they had laid for him. For, to them, this sinister war of revenge was still a game—whereas for the people of Earth, for whom the members of Spectrum did battle, it was a desperate and ruthless struggle for existence.

He moved round the base of the shoulder of rock and saw the chalet above, squatting on a wide ledge in the bright moonlight. There was a light on its porch but the rest of the place appeared to be in darkness. He checked, listening. There was no sound but the sighing of the breeze through the pines which marched up the snowy slope to his right.

Cautiously he went on, keeping to the snow verge. When he reached the steps leading up to the porch, he checked again, listening. He heard nothing, and went on up.

Gently he tried the door. It was locked. Taking from his kit a small electronic key, he held it against the lock. There was a faint humming and

the tongue of the lock slid back. He eased the door open. It creaked slightly. In the stillness of the night the sound was like a cry.

Just inside the door, he halted, listening again. The moonlight that filtered into the room did little to relieve the darkness.

From somewhere in the gloom at the rear, it seemed to him that a door slid back. He stiffened. Then he heard the sound of a heavy, measured, almost laboured footstep.

The skin of his scalp crawled, his heart-beats quickened. What was there in the darkness before him?

Taking out his torch, he switched it on. Standing a yard or so away was a giant humanoid figure.

For a moment, the shock of it blinded him to what it really was. But when he flashed the torch into the great unwinking eyes, there was no reaction as there would have been from any living, seeing creature. He relaxed.

“A robot,” he muttered, with a relieved little laugh.

He might have guessed poor old Berlein would have had something like this. All modem inventors got around to a robot servant sooner or later, even if they were not as grotesquely human in appearance as this one.

Scarlet started to move across the room towards the open doorway that he saw beyond the robot, and which he surmised led to the laboratory workshop. But, as he tried to walk past the robot, it said in a metallic voice, “*Admit no one!*”

A stiff-jointed arm shot out like a piston and fingers of steel clamped on his shoulder.

“*Admit no one!*”

The robot began to force him back towards the outer door. The vice-like grip was numbing his shoulder. He struck out with the hand that was balled

about the torch. It was like hitting a wall. Inexorably he was thrust back towards the door.

“Admit no one!”

It occurred to Scarlet that this transistor-minded thing was likely to throw him over a precipice. As he retreated, he looked around, flashing his torch in the hope of seeing something he could use as a weapon. In a rack just inside the door was a mountaineer’s ice-axe. Switching the torch to his other hand, he snatched up the axe and brought it down with all his strength on the robot’s head.

It stopped dead. But it did not relax its numbing grip on his shoulder.

Desperately he struck again. For an instant nothing happened. He was going to strike a third time when the other hand of the robot swung out to grip his waist and he was swung off his feet as if he had been a bag of feathers.

The robot turned about and careered drunkenly around the room, crashing into furniture, charging over a glass-fronted bookcase to bring books cascading to the floor. The helpless Scarlet took some ugly blows and one crack on the head almost knocked him unconscious. He had dropped the torch, which lay on the floor, faintly illuminating the macabre scene. But he still had hold of the ice-axe.

He jabbed at one of the big eyes with the pick end of the axe, and felt the plastic burst. His blood ran cold when the robot uttered a high-pitched sound that seemed almost like a human cry of pain.

It began to chant: *“Destroy! Destroy! Destroy!”*

But its two-handed grip on him did not relax. Swinging, it marched through the inner doorway, cracking Scarlet’s bare head cruelly against the lintel. Scarcely conscious, he was vaguely aware of being carried across a laboratory which was lit by a light coming from another room beyond.

“Destroy! Destroy!”

That relentless unhuman chanting struck terror into his dazed mind, but he was powerless to struggle more than ineffectually in the grasp of those steely fingers. He was carried into the annexe and slammed down on a slab of metal with a force that drove the breath from his racked body. Half-stunned, he lay there, blinking stupidly up at the robot towering above him, its hands outstretched, almost, he thought bemusedly, as if it were performing some sacrificial rite.

“Destroy! Destroy!”

Then he became aware of another sound, a soft whirring above him. He looked up and an icy hand seemed to close about his pounding heart. Descending towards him was a massive metal plate, similar to the one on which he sprawled.

Only then did the horrific truth dawn on him. He was between the jaws of a hydraulic press, big enough to crush a small car into a sheet of metal.

For a brief moment he was powerless to move, as if his mind could not send instructions to his limbs. Then, with a desperate effort, he rolled off the press and hit the floor with a thud. Above him the upper section of the press crashed down.

“Destroy! Destroy!”

He realised the robot was looming over him, hands reaching down to grasp him again. For the first time he remembered the anti-Mysteron gun. A high voltage charge could play havoc with an electronic instrument.

He snatched it from its holster, discharged it full into the one-eyed plastic face that bent towards him. There was a vivid blue flash, the stench of heat-seared plastic and then the chanting ceased abruptly and the robot pitched forward across him, powerless. Scarlet thrust away its weight from him and sat up, cuffing the cold sweat from his brow.

“I sure don’t know why you inserted that *destroy* circuit, Berlein,” he muttered. “But if it was another of your practical jokes it misfired—on me!!!”

Getting stiffly to his feet, he left the annexe. He found a light switch just inside the laboratory and pressed it. Curiously he looked about him. Off-beat clocks, electronic and mechanical toys and gadgets stood on shelves, on benches, many of them half-finished, a memorial to the dead man’s inventiveness. But he wasn’t interested in them.

Then he thought he saw what he was seeking. At the far end of the laboratory was a small control panel, with a video screen above it. He crossed to it, studied the controls. One dial was marked *La Terre*, another *Le Mer*.

“Land and sea,” he murmured. “Sounds promising.”

He realised he was still grasping his anti-Mysteron gun. Putting it down on the bench beside him, he turned the *Sea* dial pointer to the letters S.A. The screen lit up and on it appeared a line map of the South Atlantic, hemmed by the coastlines of South America and Africa.

What now, he thought?

It occurred to him that, if Berlein had been experimenting up to the time he put through the video call to Cloudbase, the detector was probably already tuned into the vibration wavelength of the rare metal in the shell of the *Oceanus X*.

If so, where was the submarine? Certainly there was no indication of it on this chart of the South Atlantic.

Scarlet looked at his watch, made a mental calculation. The *Oceanus* should have been almost to Cape Town by now, if it had taken a direct course across the Atlantic. But what if it hadn’t been making for the African thermic station? Suppose it had gone farther south to clear the Cape?

He turned the pointer to another location marked S.O. A chart of a section of the great Southern Ocean appeared, showing the ragged ice-line of the Antarctic continent at the bottom, the southernmost tips of the continents of America and Africa at the top. His pulses quickened. There, well south of the Cape of Good Hope, was a blip of light moving eastwards, almost along the line of the fortieth parallel of latitude.

“That’s it,” he thought. “She’s going into the Indian Ocean. She’s bypassing Cape Town—maybe making for the Bombay station. If I can find Berlein’s video transmitter...”

The thought froze in his mind. He swayed slightly on his feet. That dizzy feeling was sweeping over him.

A Mysteron!

Too late, from the corner of his eye, he saw the blacksleeved hand that closed about the butt of the anti-Mysteron gun that he had put down on the bench beside him.

He swung—and then went rigid, his throat tightening. Standing a few feet from him, a cold smile on his ashen face, the anti-Mysteron gun in his hand, was Captain Black.

“So we meet again, Captain Scarlet,” the Mysteron agent said tonelessly.

“You have been here all the time?” Scarlet scarcely recognised his own voice.

“On the mountain—yes. Partly by reason of what you Earthmen call luck or chance, partly by reason of your own undoubted courage and determination, you escaped the death that was planned for you, Captain Scarlet.”

Scarlet smiled tightly. “I’m sorry I was so inconsiderate, Captain Black.”

“But you *were* considerate, Captain Scarlet.” The cold, dark eyes seemed to mock him. “Or were you just stupid like most of your fellow Earthmen? This is the gun with which you have destroyed many Mysterons. If it will kill them, it will also destroy you—utterly and beyond the hope of retrometabolism, Captain Scarlet.”

Scarlet stared at the unblinking eyes of the Mysteron who had once been one of his colleagues—and saw implacable hatred in them.

“Farewell, Captain Scarlet!”

Deliberately, Captain Black raised the gun and pointed it between Scarlet’s eyes.

CHAPTER 6

Isle of Caves

CAPTAIN SCARLET KNEW he was a few seconds from eternity.

He had nothing to lose. In the instant that Captain Black's finger touched the trigger button of the anti-Mysteron gun, the Spectrum man dived forward. The blue-white ray of high voltage electricity stabbed inches above his bare head, scorching it, and sizzled into the video screen of the long range detector unit.

As his lunging body struck Captain Black's legs, he heard the roar of an explosion and waves of heat washed over him. Captain Black crashed to the floor, the gun flying from his hand and skittering across the laboratory. Desperately, silently, they fought. To Black's Spectrum-trained fitness was added the cold implacable hatred of a Mysteron. It was no time for half-measures. Scarlet rammed his head into Black's face, felt the nose flatten under the impact. Blood spurted over him. In turn, the Mysteron agent brought his knee hard up into the pit of Scarlet's stomach, heaving him over his head.

Scarlet crashed to the floor. Dazed, he thrust himself up again. To lie there for a moment would be to put himself at the mercy of the Mysteron. As he staggered to his feet, Black rolled over and came upright, silhouetted against the flames from the destroyed detector unit, which were now licking greedily along the benches.

Conventional weapons were useless in this bitter fight, unless to maim or handicap. Scarlet glanced around swiftly in the hope that he could see the

anti-Mysteron gun. And in that instant the Mysteron leapt like a black panther.

Just in time, Scarlet thrust out a crooked arm, jabbing it under Black's jaw, checking him in mid-spring. The Mysteron's head jerked back with a force that would have snapped a weaker man's neck. But he uttered no sound. Shaking his head, he came on again, fencing for a hold.

Scarlet retreated warily, trying to gauge the distance to the door. This was an occasion when discretion really was the better part of valour. He had to escape from Black while there was yet time. Even now the Mysteron, by a process of mental communication which seemed to link all Mysteron agents, might be summoning others to his aid.

One thing was obvious to Scarlet. In their overall plan of destruction, his own annihilation was included, for he more than any other Spectrum member, by reason of his virtual indestructibility, was the greatest obstacle to the Mysterons in their prolonged war of nerves against the peoples of the Earth.

Suddenly Scarlet trod back on something on the floor, something that rolled under his foot, throwing him off-balance. As he fell on one knee, he saw it was the anti-Mysteron gun. Black saw it too. It skidded against a bench. He darted for it.

Scarlet acted instinctively, hurling himself forward off his knee. As Black bent to pick up the gun, Scarlet crashed into him, sending him reeling back into the leaping flames.

There was an agonised shriek, for Mysteronised humans still feel pain. His uniform smouldering, his face contorted with pain, Captain Black staggered back out of the flames. For a moment Scarlet was touched with compassion. Then he remembered what Black was, that he had planned and brought about the death of Jacques Berlein.

Grimly he groped for the gun. His fingers were closing about it when Captain Black, flashing him a look of fury, leapt over a bench and vanished through the doorway leading to the chalet living room.

Gun in hand, Scarlet scrambled to his feet. The flames were racing through the laboratory now. Heat was toasting his face. There was an acrid smell as his hair began to singe.

He ran through the chalet out on to the porch. The cold mountain air was like balm to his scorched cheeks. He drank it eagerly into his lungs.

He searched the moonlit terrain below him. There was no sign of Captain Black, but yet again he had the feeling that unseen eyes were watching him. Back in the blazing laboratory, something exploded, and flame gushed through the chalet, licking at him with greedy tongues.

Flinging himself from the porch, he went slithering and rolling down a snow slope towards the road. He brought up against a boulder, gazing back at the burning chalet on the ledge above. The mountain face above it seemed to erupt as a louder explosion occurred, lighting up the deep valley. Scarlet crouched under the lee of the boulder while rock debris and flaming timber showered about him to sizzle in the snow. Then the echoes of the blast died away, the flames subsided rapidly and the silence of the Alpine night closed about him.

Scarlet mopped the sweat from his face. Being virtually indestructible didn't make a narrow escape like that any easier to stomach. Partial Mysteronisation hadn't destroyed his human emotions and reactions.

He wasn't ashamed to admit fear, any more than his Spectrum colleagues were. Only sub-humans with no imagination were never afraid, and only fools pretended they were not. Presently he got to his feet, thrust his anti-Mysteron gun into its holster and began to limp down the mountain road.

Some time later, the gendarme of the village at the foot of the mountain was roused from his bed to see a hatless, smoke-stained figure in a grimy red and black uniform standing on his porch.

“*Ma foi!*” He blinked at the rainbow-hued badge on the stranger’s sleeve. “Spectrum! *Sacre bleu*—then you must be the famous Captain Scarlet?”

“Yeah. Can I use your radio transmitter please?”

“*Certainement!* Please to come in, Captain. And when you have transmitted your message—hot coffee, *oui?*”

Scarlet smiled wearily. “*Oui*. Very much *oui*, *mon ami!*”

In the Cloudbase control room, Colonel White listened grimly to Scarlet’s radioed report.

“Poor Berlein,” he said. “Little did he realise what he was getting caught up in when he played that crazy prank at San Diego. But we must be thankful things weren’t a lot worse—we might have lost you, too, Scarlet.”

“Pity I couldn’t have saved his detector, sir. With that installed on Cloudbase we’d have been holding all the aces! The *Oceanus* couldn’t have moved more than a few miles without us being aware of it.”

“Sure. But we know it’s making for the Indian Ocean, so that seems to put Cape Town in the clear. The next target could be Bombay—five hours away at maximum speed. I’ll alert the World Navy to blockade the sea approaches, and I’ll get our agents cracking at the station itself. I’m sending the jet to pick you up, Captain. You need a spell in the sleep room.”

“You’re telling *me*, sir?”

Two hours later, Scarlet, refreshed and newly equipped, reported to Colonel White in the control room.

“Any developments, sir?” he asked as he sat down on the stool the Colonel raised for him before the desk.

“None, Captain. World Naval units are still converging on Bombay, but there are enough strike craft already in the area to destroy the *Oceanus* a hundred times over.”

“If they can find it, sir.”

“Yes—that’s the rub, Scarlet. At Cape Town, the Navy laid magnetic submarine mines and nets, but I still wouldn’t have taken a bet that the *Oceanus* wouldn’t get through—not with the equipment it carries. It’s out of this world, Scarlet.”

“So are the Mysterons,” Scarlet said with bitter humour. “How about the Bombay thermic station? What’s the position there?”

“Our agents, under the command of Lieutenant Sepia, have had the fullest co-operation from the Indian authorities and the station’s been checked and double-checked—to use a trite but very appropriate phrase—with a fine tooth comb. A dozen combs come to that. They’ve found no trace of a device planted to trigger an explosion such as you witnessed at Rio.”

“There’s still time for that to be done. sir. Even at maximum speed the *Oceanus* can’t reach Bombay in much less than three hours from now. What about the station personnel? They’ve been vetted, of course?”

“Naturally. Sepia has used the detector on all of them. None is a Mysteron agent.”

“There’s still time for one of them to be Mysteronised.”

“It wouldn’t be much use now, Captain. When the check was negative I gave orders that all personnel were to be withdrawn and a water patrol maintained to prevent anyone from landing again. The station’s on an island in the harbour. It can safely run itself for several hours.”

Scarlet nodded approval. “Things could scarcely be more water-tight, sir.” He smiled wryly. “No pun intended. But...”

“Well, Scarlet?”

“Have I your permission to flip over to Bombay and take a look around for myself, sir?”

The Colonel frowned. “Lieutenant Sepia’s one of our most reliable outside operatives, Captain.”

“I’m not doubting his efficiency, sir, but we can all make mistakes.” He grinned ruefully. “I know to my cost—and I’ve considerably more first-hand experience of the Mysterons than Sepia.”

Colonel White got up from his desk and walked into one of the window wings, staring out thoughtfully at the diamond-bright stars.

“Guess it might be a wise precaution, Scarlet. But there’s an aspect of this Bombay business that’s troubling me.”

“Sir?”

The Colonel looked round quizzically at him. “Suppose this is another red herring? The Mysterons knew about that detector of poor Berlein’s—his Mysteronised being told you how it worked—yet they let you reach it and operate it.”

“But they didn’t, sir. It was planned that I should end up in the glacier—and when that failed Captain Black tried to kill me. Believe me, sir, *they* were no red herrings!”

Worried though he was, the Spectrum chief permitted himself an amused smile as he walked back to the desk.

“I was forgetting that, Scarlet. And yet, how do we know the Mysterons did not foresee the failure of both those attempts on you? How can we ever hope to understand the tortuous working of minds centuries ahead of ours? But leaving all that out—we could still be following a red herring to Bombay. What is to stop the *Oceanus* doubling back and taking a crack at Cape Town after all?”

Scarlet looked startled. “Jupiter! I never thought of that, sir. Maybe it wasn’t wise to call off the blockade of Cape Town?”

“I haven’t,” the Colonel said with grim satisfaction. “Darn it, I can’t have the World Navy scuttling backwards and forwards between one ocean and another like a lot of confounded shuttlecocks. No doubt that’s just what the Mysterons would want us to do.”

“So you’ve got both places blockaded?” Scarlet smiled. “But if we have to blockade Copenhagen and Nanking as well, sir, the Navy’s resources will be stretched pretty thin.”

“Exactly!” Colonel White sat down, frowning. “That would probably play right into the Mysterons’ hands—if they’ve got any. They’d be able to get through to any station they chose.”

He was silent for a moment or so, lost in thought, then slapped his hand down on the desk and burst out, “If only I could see a pattern in this set-up—get half a clue to how they’re going to carry out their threat! How do we even know that the whole *Oceanus* business isn’t one gigantic red herring to divert us from the real trail, Captain?”

Scarlet shrugged. “We don’t know, sir. But it’s my hunch that the *Oceanus* is vital to their objective. Can I go to Bombay or not?”

His chief sighed. “Sure, you can go, Captain. You might hit on a clue to this confounded conundrum. If anything breaks elsewhere, I can get you back fast enough! Good luck!”

Less than two hours later, the Spectrum jet piloted by Captain Blue hurtled low over the Indian Ocean, where a vast perimeter of Naval vessels maintained their blockade, and touched down at Bombay Airport. The slender inverted white cone of the control tower was silhouetted against the glare of the new day’s sun, appearing with tropical suddenness above the ragged ramparts of the Western Ghats range.

“Bursting like an atom bomb—as they used to say in the old travel books,” Captain Blue commented drily.

“Mighty good description,” said Scarlet. “Let’s hope it isn’t an omen.”

“We’ll know in just over an hour from now, maybe,” Blue replied soberly. “Pity help this swarming hive if the power station does go up,” he went on, indicating the tall, graceful, but closely-spaced buildings of the modern city.

“Gateway of India they called it in the old days, didn’t they?”

“Sure, but I guess now it’s a matter of all air lanes leading to India... Here comes Lieutenant Sepia.”

Scarlet alighted from the jet to greet a tall, slim young man in a chocolate-brown and black Spectrum uniform, looking strangely conspicuous among the mainly white-clad people of all nations who thronged the busy airport, even at this early hour. Shaking hands with this handsome darkfaced youngster, whose gleaming white teeth showed in a warm smile, Scarlet thought how appropriate his code name was.

“So there’s nothing new to report, Lieutenant?” he asked.

“No, Captain—I would have reported immediately to Cloudbase if there had been.”

There was a faint hint of stiffness about the young officer’s reply that even his precise English could not conceal, and Scarlet smiled.

“I’m not here because the Colonel doubts your integrity or efficiency, Lieutenant,” he said reassuringly. “I came at my own request. As you know, I have special experience of the Mysterons. I might be able to spot something that even your meticulous methods have not revealed.”

“I can assure you, Captain, that I have overlooked nothing.”

Sepia broke off, staring over Scarlet’s shoulder towards the hatch of the Spectrum jet. Captain Blue was framed in it, focusing his Mystreron detector

on them.

Blue glanced at the instant photograph, and grinned cheerfully.

“Okay, Lieutenant. One positive, one negative.”

“One positive?” The young officer’s face tightened and his hand dropped to his gun. “You mean there is a Mysteron agent...”

“Not a Mysteron agent,” Scarlet laughed. “The positive in the photograph is *me*. Remember, I’m partly Mysteronised, so detectors take positive pictures of me. The X-ray negative picture is you Lieutenant.”

“Just a routine precaution, Lieutenant,” Blue explained.

Sepia’s face went a shade darker.

“You—you mean you thought that *I* might have been a Mysteron?”

“It was on the cards,” Scarlet replied. “You see, Lieutenant, we could take no chances.”

Sepia smiled sheepishly. “I get your point, Captain. I stand corrected. It is true—one can never be too careful. I am sorry I mounted my high horse, as you English would say.”

Scarlet slapped his shoulder. “Forget it, Lieutenant. Your keenness does you credit—and it takes a good man to admit he was wrong.”

“Thank you, Captain. What would you like to do first—inspect the station personnel? I have them in loose custody in the Taj Mahal Hotel —”

“Let them stay there, Lieutenant—at least until we decide to order emergency measures. I’ll take a look at the station itself.”

“Certainly. Come this way. I have a hover launch waiting. As you know, the station is located on an island six miles out in the harbour.”

“Just as well under the circumstances. The city could escape the worst of the blast if an explosion does occur.”

“Want me along?” Blue asked.

“No—stay here,” Scarlet replied. “No sense in putting all our eggs in one basket, pal.”

Sepia frowned slightly as they crossed the airport. “That was a strange expression you used, Captain—one of your English proverbs, I think. Did it mean that you anticipate trouble from which you may need Captain Blue to extricate us?”

“I always expect trouble when there are Mysterons on the...”

Scarlet stopped, putting his hand to his brow and swaying slightly.

Sepia looked at him anxiously. “Captain, what is the matter?”

“That dizzy feeling—”

“The heat perhaps.”

“No, Lieutenant. This is a special sensation. As you know, since being partly Mysteronised I have acquired a sixth sense that enables me to detect the nearness of Mysteron agents.”

“So there is one here?”

Drawing his anti-Mysteron gun, Lieutenant Sepia looked about him eagerly. Many people—travellers, officials and airport workers—were passing to and fro, jostling them.

“Put that gun away,” Scarlet snapped. “You’re attracting attention. We don’t want to start a panic. It’ll be bad enough if we have to order emergency measures.”

Sepia frowned as he obeyed. “But we must find him, Captain.”

“How do you find a needle in a haystack, even with a magnet?” Scarlet countered. “My sense only operates at close range and the detectors have to be focused on a suspect—”

Scarlet checked, his jaw tightening. That dizzy feeling had returned. He glanced about him with steely eyes. Passing them was a swarthy, dumpy man in the white uniform of an airport official. Scarlet remembered him

passing in the opposite direction only a few moments earlier. The man, whose insignia denoted he was of a fairly high rank, did not glance at them. That in itself was suspicious, for most people regarded them curiously, the significance of Spectrum being known to people the world over.

“That could be the fellow,” Scarlet whispered to Sepia. “Try your detector on him.”

The Lieutenant took a snapshot of the back of the retreating figure and flicked out the instant photograph. His dark face lit up excitedly.

“Captain! It’s *positive*. Do I use the gun?”

“Patience, Lieutenant. As I said before, you might start a panic. Besides, there’s more to this sinister game than merely eliminating every Mysteron we encounter, desirable though that may be. Let’s follow that guy.”

They strolled after the man with apparent casualness, allowing other people to get between them and their quarry, but always keeping him in sight.

“You see, Lieutenant,” Scarlet said quietly. “This might be the Mysteron who’s the inside agent at the station. If he’s already planted the device we suspect is necessary to allow the *Oceanus* to trigger an explosion...”

“But I do not see how that is possible.”

“Nothing is impossible to the Mysterons, Lieutenant—at least by our limited standards. But if the device has already been planted we’ve got just about one hour to find it. If it hasn’t been planted yet—well, this character could be on his way to do it right now.”

“I understand, Captain,” Sepia said with a boyish smile. “You are right. I have much to learn about the Mysterons, but—”

“Well?”

“Our uniforms. Will he not become suspicious if he should see us following?”

“I doubt it. A Mysteron agent is little more than a robot. He will appear to behave normally with the same characteristics as he had when human, but once he has been instructed—programmed if you like—to carry out a certain task, he will do so against all odds—unless stopped by us.”

“Of course. I was forgetting that.”

“His masters might even be aware that we are following him, Lieutenant. But that is part of the game. They put down the pieces on the board—and challenge us to beat them. If we stop an agent from carrying out the task assigned to him, they will accept defeat and pass on to their next preconceived move in this battle of nerves.”

“Like good chess players?”

“Sure. And... as when up against a good chess player, we never know for certain what the next move will be. We can only guess. If we guess right now—okay! If we don’t...”

“Then Bombay may be devastated. Perhaps we should have insisted on an evacuation, Captain?”

“How do you evacuate an island city of five million people in a few short hours, Lieutenant? They’d have to know the reason—and panic might kill more than the explosion. The island’s far enough away for some of the shock to be absorbed—but we must expect a tidal wave.”

“But of course it may not happen,” Sepia said hopefully. “In the words of another of your quaint English sayings—we must keep our fingers crossed.”

“Sure—but I’m expecting the worst now we’ve located a Mysteron agent, Lieutenant.”

They followed the Mysteron through a narrow gloomy street, one of the few relics of the old city of the last century, not yet lit by the rising sun. There were few people about here and, though the Mysteron did not look

back, they made full use of such cover as they could find—in doorways and behind balcony posts.

The street led down to the waterside. The tide was in, and the water lapped idly against the rotting piles of an ancient jetty, to which modern launches and old native fishing boats were moored. They watched the white-uniformed Mysteron board a small launch, cast off the moorings and chug away down a narrow channel between closely-moored craft.

“My hover launch isn’t far away, Captain,” said Sepia.

“We may lose him if we waste time getting it,” Scarlet replied. “We’ll borrow one of these launches. Less conspicuous, too.”

They slipped down into a launch and cast off. Sepia started the engine and they purred out through a maze of small craft into the sun-gilded waters of the open harbour. Scarlet looked about the immense expanse, still one of the finest natural harbours in the world. It was studded with green and silver islets and with anchored vessels of all sizes from modern atomic liners to rusty old coastal tramps. There was even an ancient Arab sailing dhow, for even in the twenty-first century time stood still for some of the peoples of the Orient.

“The entrance to the harbour is seven miles wide, Captain,” said Sepia. “The *Oceanus* would have little difficulty in creeping in unseen if it can get through the blockade.”

Steadily they moved over the calm water, which in the monsoon season could be suddenly whipped to fury by squalls and be unnavigable by small craft. A few miles out there rose from a low flat island, as if from the water itself, the power-beaming towers of the thermic station, gleaming in the hot sun climbing above the distant mountains on the mainland. The Mysteron’s launch appeared to be making straight for it.

There were binoculars in the launch. Looking through them, Scarlet saw three white launches patrolling about the island, manned, he knew, by police and Spectrum agents.

“How’s our friend proposing to get past that cordon?” Scarlet wondered aloud.

But, even as he spoke, their quarry veered off seawards. Scarlet saw that he was making for another island, that lay like a green and silver jewel upon the blue breast of the water. Scarlet focused his glasses on it. The island appeared to consist of two long, low hills joined by a narrow valley, the lower slopes of which were clothed with luxuriant tropical growths, among which palm trees abounded.

“What’s that?” Scarlet asked Sepia.

“Elephanta Island—the isle of the caves, they call it. In the old days it was a great place for sightseers, Captain. There are many wonderful rock temples with magnificent sculptures over fifteen hundred years old. But not many people go there these days.”

“Tourists are too sophisticated, I guess. The ocean depths, the moon and the nearer planets are far more exciting—in prospective! Wonder what that guy’s going there for?”

Sepia shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine, Captain.”

As they neared the island, Scarlet pulled down his peak microphone and reported to Cloudbase.

“Too far from this island to the power station for there to be a tunnel connecting them, I suppose, Captain?” asked Colonel White.

“About half a mile. Not too far, I guess, but we’ll soon find out, sir.”

“Watch your step, Scarlet. It could be a trap.”

“I’m aware of that, sir, but it’s the only lead we’ve got and time’s running out on us. Any news of the *Oceanus*?”

“No. But if she is heading for Bombay she can’t be more than seven or eight hundred miles away. Keep in touch.”

The Mysteron’s launch was now swinging into a little cove enclosed by palm-clad sandy arms. Sepia steered their launch to the other side of the nearer headland and ran it up on the silvery beach. They landed and scrambled up the narrow slope to the palms. Peering through them, they saw the Mysteron beach his launch in the cove and go ashore. Keeping under the cover of the palms, they followed.

The quarry walked slowly up the beach, not once looking round. Was he aware that he had been followed? If he was, the conclusion was ominous. The Colonel could be right, Scarlet told himself—this could be a trap. But they had to take that chance, with the *Oceanus* possibly not an hour away.

CHAPTER 7

Chinese Conundrum

THEY CAME THROUGH a grove of feathery palms to the entrance of a cave temple, whose portals were sculptured from the solid rock with figures of gods and grotesque creatures from Hindu mythology. The arch of the massive doorway was of solid teak, seamed and dark with time.

Twilight lingered here still, for the sun was hidden beyond the hills, but in the dust the footprints of the Mysteron were plain to see. Scarlet and Sepia stood behind a carved pillar, peering into the dimness of the deep porch. There was no sound. No movement! In the grove behind them a bird screeched, and then was silent!

“I’ll go first,” Sepia said, in a low voice.

“No! Keep behind me,” Scarlet retorted softly. “I’ve got a hundred chances of survival to your one if anything blows.”

Drawing his anti-Mysteron gun, Scarlet moved warily forward into the porch.

The dust of ages lay there, deadening their footsteps. The porch opened into a great hall whose limits were lost in sepulchral gloom. Scarlet halted, close against the wall, listening. The smell of the centuries was thick in the air, and through it seeped a whisper of sounds suggestive of unseen or unseeable things, of indefinable sinister presences. Then, from their left, where the gloom seemed relieved a little by a faint light, came the sound. Something heavy was swinging back on massive hinges!

Scarlet tapped Sepia’s arm and moved swiftly and silently in that direction. The faint light silhouetted a colossal pillar. Rounding it

cautiously, Scarlet saw that the light came through a vent in the wall, near the rock ceiling. Whether it was natural or man-made he did not know, but the shaft of light touched on a huge, three-faced bust some twenty feet high, carved into a recess.

“The *Trimurti*,” murmured Sepia.

“Who are they?” Scarlet whispered.

“The Hindu trinity of gods—Brahma, the creator; Siva, the destroyer; Vishnu, the preserver.”

Beyond the Trimurti, the gloom deepened again. Hearing no sound, Scarlet switched on a pencil torch. The beam picked up the footprints of their quarry. They led into the dark opening of a rock passage. After a few yards the passage ended in a rock slab, out of which was carved one of the three gods of the Trimurti. The footprints vanished beneath its base.

Sepia gripped Scarlet’s arm.

“Siva—the destroyer!” he whispered hoarsely.

Scarlet felt his mouth go dry. The words seemed prophetic. He closed his mind to them. “This slab must move somehow. That must be the sound we heard.”

He examined the sculpture in the thin beam of his torch. One of the malignant eyes of Siva seemed to be worn a little smoother than the other. He pressed it, and with a dull groaning the slab swung sideways on a central pivot. Beyond was darkness!

Scarlet probed it with his torch. Solid rock walls rose to a rock ceiling. A tunnel? Was Colonel White’s hunch right? Did this lead beneath the waters of the harbour to the island on which the power station was built? Who knew what long-dead ritual it might have been used for?

The footprints of the Mysteron continued. The two Spectrum men moved on warily. Suddenly Scarlet, a pace or two ahead of Sepia, felt the

seemingly solid rock opening beneath him. He shouted a warning to Sepia and tried to leap back, but it was too late.

The next moment he was falling into Stygian darkness, while from somewhere above him a cold voice hauntingly murmured, “It was *your* destruction that was planned, Captain Scarlet. Farewell, Earthman!”

Sepia, who had checked abruptly at Scarlet’s warning, watched in horror as his colleague vanished. Then, hearing the voice of the Mysteron, he switched on his torch. The trap that had opened in the floor of the tunnel swung back with a thud. Beyond it, in the light of the torch, he saw the white uniformed Mysteron pointing a gun at him.

Sepia clawed for his anti-Mysteron gun. But, before he could draw it, the Mysteron fired. A missile struck Sepia in the chest. He stumbled and fell headlong. Then he knew no more.

Scarlet did not fall far, but he landed heavily with a jarring shock that sent nausea sweeping through him. Vaguely, he was aware of the thud, and of the trap door closing above him.

As his head cleared, he found that he was still gripping his torch. He shone it about him. He appeared to be in a cubic vault about ten feet square, with smooth, dull grey, apparently seamless walls and ceiling. A film of dust covered the floor. He felt an icy trickle down his spine when the torch light touched upon a human skeleton in one corner. Hideous thoughts filled his mind.

Finding his cap, he put it on, pulled down the peak microphone and called Lieutenant Sepia. There was no reply. He tried again. And again! The radio was dead! A suspicion grew on him as he examined one of the walls, scratching it with a tool from his survival kit.

His heart chilled! The lining of the tomb was lead. No radio waves could penetrate it.

In the control room at Cloudbase, Colonel White looked anxiously at Lieutenant Green.

“No news from Captain Scarlet yet?”

“No, sir. I can’t make contact at all.”

“Try Lieutenant Sepia.”

Outside, the stars still glittered, but the moon was dropping towards the dark rim of the Earth.

“Nothing doing, sir,” Lieutenant Green reported presently. “His channel’s open, but he doesn’t answer.” The Colonel’s face tightened. “I don’t like this, Green. Get Captain Blue.”

“Any news of Scarlet?” demanded the Colonel, when Blue came on the air, a few seconds later.

“No, sir!”

The Colonel told him of Scarlet’s last message. “Locate this Elephanta Island and find out what’s happened to those two.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

For a few moments Colonel White was lost in thought. Then, as ideas filled his troubled mind, he rapped out orders. “Request the Indian authorities to put into effect the emergency measures we recommended, Lieutenant. We dare not delay any longer. The *Oceanus* may not be more than half an hour from Bombay.”

The Lieutenant had just finished transmitting the message when a brown light winked on the computer. “Lieutenant Umber, sir—emergency call.”

“Umber?” The Colonel looked up sharply. “He’s in Nanking, isn’t he?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is it, Lieutenant?” the Spectrum chief demanded of his main Chinese operative.

“Captain Black has just arrived by air in Nanking, sir.”

“You’re sure of that, Umber?”

“Positive, sir. I’ve seen him several times before. He’s not wearing his uniform, but there’s no mistake. I used the detector on him. I’ve got an agent tailing him. What are your instructions, sir?”

“Just keep tabs on him for the time being, Lieutenant. And don’t lose him. Report every thirty minutes.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

“If the Mysterons have sent Captain Black to Nanking they must be planning a major operation there, sir,” Lieutenant Green said, as he closed Lieutenant Umber’s channel.

“Yes, Lieutenant—and we know there’s another thermic station there. I’m wondering if we’ve been sold a pup? If the *Oceanus* is making for Nanking instead of Bombay—at maximum speed—approximately where would she be now, Lieutenant?”

Green stabbed switches on the computer and a giant chart of the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia appeared on the display screen. He pressed another button and a blip showed near the East Indies.

“Beyond Cocos Island—approaching Java?” the Colonel said.

“Yes, sir. She’ll have to go past Java Head and through the Sunda Strait—the route of the old sailing ships—and up past Singapore into the South China Sea.”

“From there it’s a straight run through the Formosa Strait and the East China Sea—and then up the Yangtse River to Nanking?”

“That’s it, sir.” The Lieutenant punched another button, looked at a calculator dial. “At maximum speed it will take her approximately four hours from Java Head.”

“It would give us breathing space, anyway. But it will mean she is ignoring Cape Town and Bombay. Why? I still don’t see any pattern emerging.”

“Wait a minute, sir. Sydney—Rio—Nanking— They’re in reverse alphabetical order, sir. Could that be the pattern? That would mean Copenhagen will be next on the list and then Cape Town and Bombay.”

“That doesn’t seem neat enough for a Mysteron pattern, Lieutenant—By Jupiter!” The Colonel’s face lit up eagerly.

“What is it, sir?”

“Maybe you’ve hit on a clue to the real answer, Lieutenant. Not *reverse* alphabetical order—but simple progression from A to B to C—Australia... Brazil... China...”

“China!” the Lieutenant exclaimed. “That could be the *greatest nation* they mentioned in their warning, sir. Don’t you see, if somehow they could use the sub-stations supplied by the Nanking thermic station to trigger off a chain of explosions—the whole of China would be devastated!”

“That might be it, Lieutenant. We daren’t take a chance that it isn’t. We must stop the *Oceanus* reaching Nanking. Get me the Naval Supreme Commander.”

“S.I.G., sir.”

A few minutes later, a powerful man in the blue and black uniform of the World Navy appeared on the video screen.

“Well, Colonel?” he growled. “What is it now?”

He had never taken kindly to having to accept orders from the Spectrum chief, even though they were authorised by the World President.

“I want the mouth of the Yangtse River blockaded, please, Supreme Commander.”

The Naval man's eyes narrowed. "Now look here, Colonel. How many more wild goose chases are you sending us on? First Cape Town, then Bombay—now the Yangtse! The runaway Yankee sub can't be in three places at once—and neither can my ships!"

"You've got a Far Eastern squadron."

"A much depleted one. I sent units of it to the Indian Ocean—at *your* urgent request!"

"This should only require a few ships. I'm sorry, Supreme Commander. To some extent Spectrum is just groping in the dark—but I feel this is vital."

The Commander appeared to relent a little. "Okay, Colonel. I'll do what I can. But there's one thing I *can't* do—and that's send my ships or subs into Chinese territorial waters."

"Why not?"

"The Chinese government are in one of their awkward moods. They're not taking orders from me or anyone else—not even from the World President himself at the moment. They're talking of withdrawing from the World Federation."

"But they've done that many times before."

"Sure, and maybe it'll all blow over peacefully again this time—if they're left alone. But if we tread on their toes now by putting ships in their waters, we may find ourselves with a war on our hands."

"The World President..."

"Sorry, Colonel. The orders I've quoted *are* the President's—stay out of Chinese territorial waters! You can confirm them with him if you like."

"But, Supreme Commander—*this* is a Mysteron threat! It has priority."

"Tell that to the Chinese!" The Naval man smiled wearily. "Look, Colonel, I know you've got a tough job, but have you any *proof* that the

next target is Nanking—or even that there *is* a next target?”

“Guess not, but—”

“Then until you have, I’ve got to toe the line. This could all be part of the Mysterons’ war of nerves—setting us at each other’s throats. If I did what you’re asking and your hunch was wrong, you might have a full scale war on your conscience, Colonel. Goodbye!”

When the Naval man had gone from the screen, Colonel White heaved a sigh.

“And if I *am* right and do nothing about it, Lieutenant, I might have the death of a nation on my conscience. China will suffer either way. Somehow we’ll have to go it alone.”

“But what can we do, sir?”

“I don’t know—” The Colonel’s grey eyes gleamed.

“Project me a large scale chart of the mouth of the Yangtse.”

Lieutenant Green pressed a button, and on the map screen appeared a close-up of the Chinese river mouth. Colonel White got up and went to it. “See that, Lieutenant? Until the end of the last century the Yangtse had a wide estuary, emptying into the East China Sea on either side of Tsungming Island. Then a violent submarine upheaval closed the south channel above Shanghai completely, raising the sea bed so that the island is now joined to the mainland.”

“It’s now a peninsula, sir.”

“Yes—and the only approach to the Yangtse now is through the narrow strait of Haimenting, to the north of Tsungming. Like most of the East China Sea, it’s very shallow, but there is a narrow deep water channel close to the south shore of the strait. To reach Nanking, the *Oceanus X* must pass through that channel. If it were blocked...”

“You mean, sir?”

“I mean launch all Angels, Lieutenant!... I’m sticking my neck out as far as it can go.”

The leading strike craft, with Symphony at the controls, catapulted from the flight deck into the starry night. In the amber room the red alert signal flashed, and over the intercom Lieutenant Green’s voice boomed out.

“Angels One, Two and Three—immediate launch!”

Rhapsody and Melody, on standby duty, rose from their armchairs and hurried to the elevator shaft. They sat down in the pilot seats and shot up on the steel tubes through the launch deck trap doors into the cockpits of their waiting aircraft. The elevator tubes retracted, and the two jets hurtled away into the dark stratosphere to join Symphony’s cruising craft. In the control room, Lieutenant Green reported that the Angels were skyborne and starting operations. The epaulettes of Symphony’s cream and gold tunic flashed white.

“Control to Angel pack-leader,” said the Colonel’s terse voice. “Proceed at maximum speed to area reference point C857E. You will be briefed on arrival. Radio link is channel 051. Code call is *Chinese White*.”

“S.I.G., sir!” Excitement edged Symphony’s voice.

From a window in one of the wings of the control room, Colonel White watched the exhausts of the jets flaring against the blue-blackness of the sky, as they screamed off towards the horizon.

“What’s their E.T.A., Lieutenant?” the Colonel asked quietly.

“Approximately one hundred minutes, sir.”

The Colonel sighed. “I hope I’m playing the right card, Lieutenant. I might be plunging those girls into deep trouble.”

Green smiled. “Don’t worry, sir—they can look after themselves.”

“I know, and yet...”

Although the Spectrum chief had put the Angels through a training routine that would have reduced many a tough agent to a nerve-shattered wreck, he had come to regard his five beautiful air aces as something akin to the daughters he had hoped for but never had, before his wife died.

His jaw tightened and he turned back to his control desk. There was little room for sentiment in this grim battle against the Mysterons.

“Less than thirty minutes to zero at Bombay, Lieutenant. All we can do now is bite our nails—and hope that Captain Blue can find Scarlet.”

Captain Blue brought the Spectrum helijet down on the calm water, near the empty launch that had taken Scarlet and Sepia to Elephanta Island. He disembarked and went ashore in the inflatable dinghy.

All around the vast natural harbour, ships and small craft were raising anchor or casting off moorings, and already a steady procession was making for the open sea, heading away from the island on which the power station was built. In the island city itself, the Spectrum man knew, a general evacuation had been set in motion. As many people as could be safely handled were moving out by monorail, cars and hover ferries, across the narrow strait to the north, to find sanctuary on the mainland. Underground shelters, not used since the second Asian war half a century ago, had been re-opened.

Captain Blue followed the trail of footprints through the grove of palms to the entrance to the ancient cave temple. Warily he entered, anti-Mysteron gun held ready, his nerves like hair-triggers, ready to react at the first smell of danger.

Nothing happened! In the light of his torch he traced the footprints through the silence of the vast temple hall into the rock passage, where he found his way barred by the slab on which was carved the hideous face of Siva... the god... the Destroyer. Three sets of footprints vanished beneath

the slab, but only one reappeared—and he knew it was not made by Spectrum service boots.

Like Captain Scarlet before him, he examined the face of Siva in the light of his torch and grasped the significance of the malignant eye that was worn smoother than the other. He pressed it and the slab pivoted. He listened and heard no sound. Beyond, there was a silence as deep as that of a tomb.

Before venturing inside, he went back to the great hall and returned with a massive piece of broken statue, placing it so the rock door could not close and trap him. His heart contracted when the torch beam touched on the huddled shape of Lieutenant Sepia, his blood staining the dust of the rock floor. Kneeling beside the young officer, Blue gently turned him over. Sepia's eyes flickered open.

“Sc—Scarlet!” he gasped. “Floor... opened... Mysteron shot... me...”

His voice trailed off and his eyes closed. Captain Blue swallowed. Sepia had fought his last fight against the Mysterons.

Getting to his feet, Blue probed the darkness ahead with his torch. A yard or so from where Sepia had fallen, footprints, which he knew must be Scarlet's, ceased abruptly. Remembering Sepia's dying words, Captain Blue placed his right foot firmly in the last print. Almost silently, the floor just ahead opened downwards. He shone his torch into the widening cavity and saw the wan face of Captain Scarlet peering up at him.

“At last!” cried Scarlet hoarsely. “The—the air's almost exhausted.”

“Hold on, pal,” Captain Blue said. “Just give me time to find some way of jamming this trap open and I'll have you out of there.”

Some minutes later, using the spun-titanium line which he carried wound about his waist, Captain Blue hauled his weakened colleague from the tomb.

“Gee, thanks!” Scarlet gasped. “Guess the Mysterons intended that I should never leave that vault. One way of getting rid of a guy who’s virtually indestructible.”

His glance fell on the body of Lieutenant Sepia.

“Poor kid! We can’t afford to lose men like him, Blue.”

“Sure. If it’s any consolation, he lived long enough to warn me what had happened to you—or I guess I’d have joined you down there. Let’s get out of here in case the balloon goes up. If we’re caught on this island by the blast...”

It was dangerously near zero hour when they took off in the Spectrum helijet. Captain Blue sent it screaming away in a vertical climb. Scarlet reported to Cloudbase.

“Thank Jupiter you’re all right!” Colonel White said. “What happened?”

Scarlet told him.

“The Mysteron said that it was *my* destruction that had been planned, Colonel. Does that mean that they only moved in after I left for Bombay—and that there was no threat to the Bombay station? After all, poor Sepia found no evidence.”

“I’m inclined to believe that now, Captain. We’ll know soon enough. Meantime, there’s nothing you can do there now. Proceed to Nanking at maximum speed and contact Lieutenant Umber. I’ll brief you en route.”

“S.I.G., sir!”

Scarlet relayed the order to Captain Blue and the helijet hurtled north by east high above the Western Ghats and the great plain of India.

High over China, Symphony reported into her autoreaction helmet microphone. “Open channel 051 please. Operation Chinese White. Angel pack-leader to Colonel White.”

Her epaulettes flashed white and the Colonel's voice boomed over the frequency. "What's your location?"

"Over Kiangsu province, approaching destination C857E on course green 71 at thirty thousand feet. Speed two thousand nine reducing."

"Conditions?"

"Cirro-cumulus cloud at flight level. Scattered strato-cumulus at three thousand feet. Ground visibility otherwise excellent."

"S.I.G. Your objective is the mouth of the Yangtse River. Section map 4E(c) shows strait to north of Tsungming. Between south shore and underwater ridge two fathoms deep at reference 127a is a very narrow deepwater channel which will afford means of access to *Oceanus X*. This channel must be closed, Symphony."

"S.I.G., sir."

"I suggest you try to shatter the underwater ridge with highpower atomic missiles, to cause a rock fall that will block the channel. To get to Nanking, the *Oceanus* will then have to surface and give you a sitting target."

"But why not ask the Chinese to block the channel, sir?"

"Because, to quote the Supreme Commander of the World Navy, they are not on speaking terms with the World Federation, and will take orders from no one—least of all Spectrum. So go to it, Symphony—but look out for squalls. Good luck!"

As the Colonel went off the air, Symphony glanced below.

The towering white buildings of modern Shanghai were coming into view and beyond them the shimmering blue-green expanse of the East China Sea. To the north was the green tongue of land that was formerly Tsungming Island, but was now a hundred-mile long peninsula sheltering the sea approach to Shanghai.

“Symphony Angel to Angels Two and Three,” she said into her microphone. “Approaching target area. Reduce speed to one thousand. Line formation.”

As the three jets hurtled out over the sea in a great arc towards the north, Symphony repeated the Colonel’s briefing.

“Our Chinese friends aren’t going to like this at all, honey,” said Melody’s husky voice.

“That’s what the Colonel figures,” Symphony drawled. “But in the immortal words of the poet—ours not to reason why. Stand by! Prepare to attack!”

Symphony sent her jet screaming down towards the ribbon of water far below. At two thousand feet she could clearly see the ragged line of the ridge through the clear water, with the darkness of the narrow deepwater channel to its left.

She set the long pointed swordfish nose at the ridge... focused her missile sights...

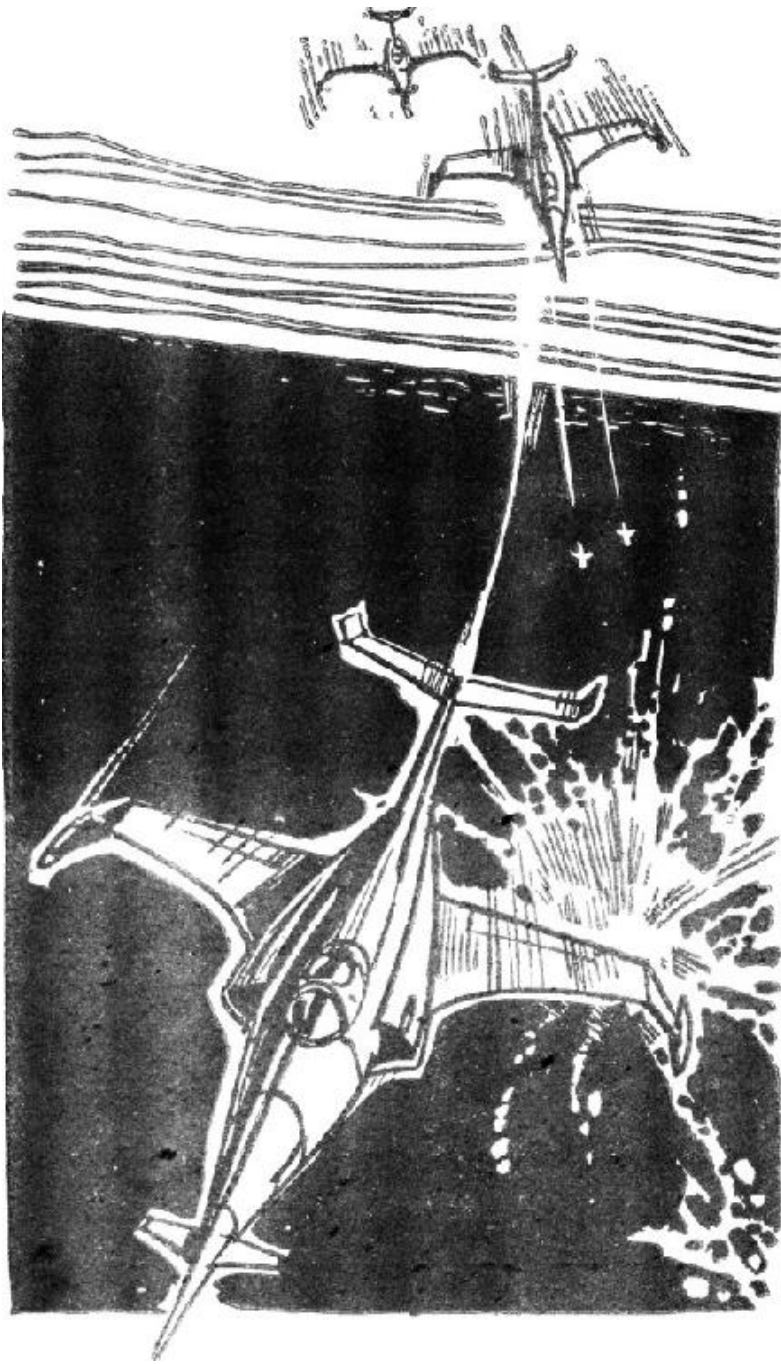
Down... down... down...

The yellow-tinged water seemed to rush up to meet her. She watched the altimeter.

Now!

She stabbed the red firing button and, as the lethal atomic missile streaked towards the water, she was hurtling up again. From the corner of her eye, she saw Melody’s plane screaming down with Rhapsody’s close on its tail. Then Melody was climbing up after her and Rhapsody was firing.

Even as Rhapsody hurled her plane skywards again, the first of the slightly delayed action missiles exploded, gouting flame and water from the strait.



“Nice shooting, Symphony!” Melody said over the intercom. “I’m afraid I put mine into the channel itself.”

“Me too,” added Rhapsody, as they levelled out.

A double explosion deep down in the strait seemed to confirm their fears.

“S.I.G.,” said Symphony. “We’ll go in again and make sure.”

At Chinese Naval headquarters at Shanghai, a radar operator, his eyes glued to the flickering screen, reported to his commander.

“Unidentified

aircraft are attacking Naimentung Strait.” The Commandant pressed a switch and spoke harshly into a microphone.

“Launch interceptor squadrons seven and eight. All surface craft in area 137 will converge on mouth of Yangtse. Aircraft must be presumed hostile.

Attack! And bring them down!”

CHAPTER 8

Pit of Death

BANKING, SYMPHONY SENT her jet hurtling back towards the target area.

“Prepare to attack,” she said into her microphone. “This time we’ll take no chances and go in lower.”

A violent explosion shattered the rest of her words and set the plane bucking like a speedboat on a rough sea.

“What was that?” she gasped, as she wrestled the plane on an even keel again.

“Seems like we hit one of those squalls the Colonel warned us about,” drawled Melody. “Ground to air missile, I guess.”

Another missile exploded below the planes, and Rhapsody gasped. “Warning shots! They couldn’t have missed at this altitude if they’d been serious.”

Symphony smiled wryly. “Gee, if they’re not serious, there’s sure something queer about my sense of humour. Climb to maximum ceiling.”

As the planes screamed upwards nose to tail, Rhapsody, at the rear, reported on the situation.

“Another squall coming up from landward—two flights of strike craft.”

“Keep climbing!” said Symphony. “They can’t follow to our maximum height.”

Vertically they climbed, standing on their tails. The Chinese interceptor planes wheeled and climbed after them, but were rapidly left far below by the incredible speed of the Angels.

Far up in the stratosphere, the Angels levelled out and headed seawards. Symphony radioed Cloudbase.

“That’s what I feared, Symphony,” the Colonel said flatly. “But at least you scored one direct hit on that ridge. Let’s hope it did the trick. Call off the operation.”

“Must we, sir?” Symphony pleaded eagerly. “Our highest speed’s far greater than theirs. We might be able to get through and make sure of closing that channel.”

“Maybe you’d get past the fighters—but the ground to air missiles, never! Besides, I’ve stuck my neck out as far as I dare. If we persist we could stir up big trouble.”

“But the *Oceanus*...”

“If she does get through, we must rely on ground operatives. Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue should soon be touching down at Nanking to team up with Lieutenant Umber. Withdraw outside Chinese territorial airspace and stand by.”

“S.I.G., sir!”

Colonel White frowned as Symphony went off the air. The Bombay thermic station had escaped destruction after all, which meant that the *Oceanus* must be heading for Nanking. It would reach the Yangtse in a little over two hours. If only they could make certain that deepwater channel was closed!

“Get me the World President,” he said to Lieutenant Green. “Emergency channel.”

President Younger’s grave face appeared in the closed circuit screen. “What is it, Colonel?” he asked. “Have you located the *Oceanus*?”

“No, sir, but...”

He told the President the whole story.

“You had no right to take such extreme action without my authority, Colonel—especially after being warned by the Supreme Commander.”

“I know, sir,” the Colonel said determinedly. “But I’m not apologising. While I’m in command of Spectrum I shall take what measures I think fit to try and protect the Earth. I had to choose between offending the Chinese and stopping the Mysterons. If I’ve blocked that channel, then my decision was justified.”

“If? You sound uncertain, Colonel.”

“Without reconnaissance I *can’t* be certain, and to avoid further complications I’ve pulled out my strike craft. But there’s one way we can make sure. If you can persuade the Chinese president to take appropriate action.”

“Too bad you didn’t think of asking me to do that earlier, Colonel,” the President said irritably. “Rather like trying to bolt the stable door when the horse has bolted, isn’t it?”

“We’re trying to bolt the stable door to stop the horse *getting in!* Will you do it, sir?”

“I’ve got to do it, Colonel. It’s my duty to try everything within my power, but I’m not holding out much hope.” President Younger’s pessimism was confirmed when he spoke on a top level video circuit to President Han Tse Wong.

“I listen to your request, sir,” the Chinese ruler said blandly, “but with much regret I cannot accede to it. This unprovoked attack on my country is part of a plot to coerce us to acquiesce to regulations of the World Federation which we find most objectionable and not consistent with our liberties. Any repetition of the attack will be met most reluctantly by reprisals.”

“But look here, President Han...”

“I look—but I do not listen.” The Chinese bowed his head. “Goodbye!”

The World President reported back to Colonel White. “So the ball is back in your court, Colonel,” he said bleakly. “You must find some other means of stopping the *Oceanus*. But no more moves like the last or we may have a full scale war on our hands.”

“If I *don’t* stop her, you may have something just as bad—a devastated China—”

“I know—and a China that will most likely blame the World Federation for its tragic plight. We’re in a tight spot, Colonel, and we’re banking on Spectrum to find the way out.”

As the President’s face faded from the screen, Colonel White passed a hand wearily over his face.

“That’s that, Lieutenant. Now it’s up to Captain Scarlet.”

The Spectrum helijet bearing Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue to Nanking hurtled eastwards high above the Yangtse. In the sprawling ancient city itself, a man in a black suit, his face strangely pale, walked up the steps into police headquarters.

“I wish to see the Commandant,” he told the Lieutenant at the reception desk.

“The Commandant is busy, sir.”

“I have important business with him. I have an introduction from President Tse Wong himself.”

The man showed a pass and the officer rose to his feet, bowing deferentially. “A thousand apologies, honourable sir. I will have you taken to him at once.”

He called an orderly who led the stranger down a marbled corridor to a massive oak door. He knocked on it and entered, bowing low to a

powerfully built Chinese in a red-braided, white uniform, who sat behind a desk before a wide window, which overlooked the tawny river.

“Enter!” the police Commandant said.

He signed to the orderly, who bowed and left the room, shutting the door behind him. The man in the black suit advanced slowly to the desk. The Commandant regarded him curiously. This white devil, as his ancestors would have called him, was very white indeed. Never had he seen so pale a face—except on a dead man. He met the cold dark eyes of his visitor, and a little chill went through him.

“I understand from the desk officer that you have important business with me, sir. What is it?”

“This!” said the stranger, taking a squat gun from his pocket.

The police Commandant uttered a startled cry and half rose to his feet, grabbing for a gun in the top drawer of his desk. The stranger’s weapon spat silently. A dart struck the Commandant in the throat, and with a choking gasp he sank back in his seat, his eyes glazing in death. For a long moment there was silence in the soundproof room. Then, through the wide window behind the dead commandant, faint green circles of light spiralled down from the noon sky to touch him.

Presently the Mysteronised man sat up, his parchment face now a paler mask, his almond eyes containing the same cold expression as his killer’s.

“You know what you have to do?” asked Captain Black.

“I know,” replied the Mysteronised Commandant, tonelessly.

The Spectrum jet touched down on the perimeter of Nanking Airport. As Scarlet and Blue alighted, a tall slim Chinese in a dark brown coloured Spectrum uniform came to meet them.

“How do, Lieutenant Umber,” Scarlet said, shaking his hand warmly. “Any developments? Still got Captain Black under observation?”

“Yes, Captain,” Umber smiled pleasantly. “His movements have been rather vague. He has even visited the central police headquarters.”

“That’s queer,” said Captain Blue.

“But significant in some way,” Scarlet said. “Nothing a Mysteron agent does is ever without significance.”

“Perhaps we can discuss a plan of operation over a cup of tea. Come, I know a nice quiet tea house. The airport restaurant is too noisy.”

They followed Umber to the airport car park, where they entered a small hovermobile.

Leaving the airport, they crossed a wide modern bridge spanning the Yangtse.

As they reached the far side, a powerful car which had been following them at a distance of some yards now began to close in on them, while another darted from a narrow side turn and pulled across the front, forcing Lieutenant Umber to stop suddenly to avoid a collision. Simultaneously, three other cars closed in on the hovermobile. Scarlet’s eyes narrowed when he saw they contained armed men in the red and black uniforms of the Chinese national police.

“Guess we now know why Captain Black visited police headquarters,” he muttered.

“What do we do, my friends?” asked Lieutenant Umber.

“We seem to have little choice,” said Scarlet, glancing at the guns levelled at them. “Reckon we’d better go along like good boys and talk this over with the Commandant.”

“I do not like this,” said Umber. “You do not understand the Chinese official mind. It has changed little in centuries. We could be kept talking for hours—and the *Oceanus* may be here in an hour or so.”

“Scarlet’s right,” Blue said. “I’d rather argue with the Commandant than those guns. I’m not indestructible!”

A spruce young captain had alighted from one of the police cars and was approaching their hovermobile.

He smiled blandly and saluted.

“Forgive this regrettable inconvenience, gentlemen, but the Commandant wishes to see you.”

Scarlet smiled. “Okay, pal! Just lead the way—we’ll follow.”

“It is madness,” Umber said fiercely. “If all of us are detained...”

And before Scarlet or Blue could stop him, he had leapt from the hovermobile and darted into the crowd which had assembled.

An officer raised his gun and fired a warning shot over his head, narrowly missing an innocent onlooker and galvanising the placid crowd into near panic. They scattered hurriedly swallowing the Spectrum lieutenant. The last Scarlet saw of him, he was vanishing into a narrow alley between two ancient buildings.

The police captain snapped orders at his men, some of whom hurried away through the crowd, and then he spoke rapidly in Chinese into the microphone at his lapel. When he had finished he turned to the two Spectrum men, who were being held at gun point by two of the policemen.

“I hope you will not be so misguided as your colleague, gentlemen. He will be caught, and there are several penalties for resisting arrest.”

“Arrest?” Scarlet regarded him sharply. “You said nothing about arrest, Captain—you said the Commandant wanted to see us. On what grounds do you arrest us?”

“The Commandant will explain. Please to drive slowly to headquarters.”

Scarlet exchanged a glance with Captain Blue, then slid behind the control panel of the hovermobile. A police officer got in behind them, gun

held ready. The cavalcade swept through the city, a strange mixture of ultra-modern and ancient buildings, of wide avenues and narrow crowded thoroughfares, and stopped in the yard of the imposing central police headquarters.

Scarlet and Blue were ordered from the hovermobile and in a bare ante-room were searched. Their weapons and equipment, including Captain Blue's Mysteron detector, were taken from them. As an afterthought, the young captain, smiling apologetically, removed their caps.

"Pardon, gentlemen, but you must not be allowed to communicate with your colleagues. Come!"

Flanked by four armed policemen, they followed the captain along a marbled corridor and into a spacious room where a parchment-faced officer in a red-braided white uniform sat behind a desk.

"Welcome, gentlemen," he said coldly.

"Look here, Commandant..."

Scarlet's protest died on his lips as that familiar dizzy feeling swept over him. He was gripped with nausea.

Captain Blue glanced at him and immediately recognised the symptoms. He gasped. "He's a Mysteron!"

"Yes. Maybe Umber was wise to make a break for it."

The young captain put their guns and equipment on the desk and said, "One of them escaped, sir, but he will be caught. I have put out a general call for his arrest."

The Mysteronised Commandant regarded Scarlet and Blue with inscrutable dark eyes.

"These are the important ones. Manacle them and put them in the pit!"

"The pit, sir?" The Captain looked startled. "But they are members of the Spectrum. The pit is reserved for only violent criminals."

“Do as I say!”

The Captain saluted. “Yes, sir!”

Manacles were snapped about the Spectrum men’s wrists and they were led away.

As they went through the doorway, a cold voice said, “Farewell, Captain Scarlet! Farewell, Captain Blue!”

They were ushered along the corridor. When the Captain spoke a code word, a steel-barred gate opened electronically and they passed through into a circular chamber, around which were the grilled doors of cells. A massive brute of a Chinese in a drab yellow uniform came from an office, a bunch of keys dangling in his great paw of a hand.

The Captain spoke to him in Chinese, and the gaoler turned and led the way along a corridor flanked by other cells. At the end, a spiral staircase led downwards. They clanked down this and arrived in a stone-walled corridor, lit only by a neon strip which ran down the middle of the moss-grown ceiling. The walls were damp and Scarlet imagined they must be very near the river level.

At the end of the corridor was a rusted iron door. The gaoler selected a big key and inserted it in the lock. It turned easily, showing that, in spite of its age, the door had been well used. It creaked open on heavy hinges and the gaoler stood aside and stolidly motioned to Scarlet to enter.

A fetid smell touched Scarlet’s nostrils, almost causing him to wretch. He exchanged grim looks with Captain Blue. But what could they do, two men against six—manacled, and menaced by guns?

The police captain’s voice broke the silence.

“I regret this personally, gentlemen, but I must obey orders.”

“Look here, Captain,” said Scarlet. “Those orders weren’t given by your Commandant, but by a Mysteron agent. Somehow, they Mysteronised your

Commandant.”

The Captain regarded him suspiciously. “What proof have you of that, Captain Scarlet?”

“I can tell. It’s a sort of sixth sense I have.”

The Captain smiled blandly. “You expect me to believe that?”

“Maybe not. But you can test for yourself. That gadget like a camera which you took from my colleague is a Mysteron detector. Take a photograph of the Commandant with it. If you get an X-ray negative, then he’s human. If you get an ordinary photograph—then that proves he’s what I say he is.”

“It would not prove it to me, Captain Scarlet.” The Captain gestured at the doorway. “Come, if you do not enter voluntarily you will be thrown inside. I am sure you will choose the more dignified course.”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Scarlet walked through the doorway. The interior was dimly lighted from some source below. The stone floor was slimy under his feet, and there was a dank, loathsome smell like rotting seaweed. He took another cautious step and suddenly he was sliding down a chute. Vainly he tried to keep his balance. Without the use of arms it was hopeless. He fell and skidded downwards on his back.

Then he was hurtling out into nothingness.

He did not fall far, landing heavily on what felt like wet straw. A moment later Captain Blue landed on top of him, driving the breath from him. From above, sounding as remote as if it were in another world, came the clanging of a door. They sat up, looking about them as their eyes became adjusted to the dim light, which was coming from a grilled aperture some ten feet above them.

Scarlet saw they were in a circular chamber, its dark stone walls dappled with moss and evil-looking fungi.

“So this is the pit?” he muttered.

“Sure—reserved for the most violent criminals,” Captain Blue said bitterly. “The Chinese don’t change much.”

“Do any of us? The Captain had the decency to protest. He might have done more than protest if I could have convinced him that the Commandant was now a Mysteron agent.”

He got to his feet, looking up at the grilled aperture. “Make me a back, pal.”

Standing on Captain Blue’s broad shoulders, Scarlet was able to see through the aperture, which was right up against the mouldering ceiling.

He found himself looking out on the swirling sunlit waters of the Yangtse. Across the river, hundreds of small craft were moored, jostling each other. Most of them were sampans, little different to their predecessors of a century before.

On this side there were none within hailing distance of the aperture, apart from two police hover launches moored to a jetty.

“If only the police hadn’t taken our kits, we might have been able to break out of here,” Scarlet murmured.

Then his eyes fell on a water mark below the jetty, and he remembered with a touch of horror that the Yangtse was still a tidal river.

And that high water mark was well above the level of the aperture!

He dropped down and told Captain Blue what he had seen. He saw his companion’s good-looking face tighten.

“Know something, buddy,” Blue said flatly. “I checked on a few facts about Nanking in the micro-files on the way here—and high tide today is at thirteen hundred hours.”

“And it was a few minutes after noon when we landed at the airport.”

“Sure, so that gives us less than an hour before we start swimming, pal.”

They stared bleakly at each other. Something scuttled through the wet straw near their feet. A rat, Scarlet thought. But he wasn't worried about rats. He knew now why the straw was wet.

He licked his lips. "Maybe it's lucky for us Lieutenant Umber did escape," he said quietly.

"The police captain seemed a decent guy," Blue drawled. "Maybe he'll take the hint about the Mysteron detector. That'll give us two chances of beating the deadline."

Up in the Commandant's Office, the police captain had reported to his Mysteronised superior. He looked at the desk. All the Spectrum equipment had gone.

"Well, Captain?" asked the Mysteron agent.

"The things we took from the prisoners, sir—there was a camera that looked interesting."

"I have ordered everything to be sent to the disintegrator, Captain. Report back to patrol duty. The third Spectrum agent must be found."

The Captain met the cold dark eyes and saluted.

"Yes, sir."

They stood in the bottom of the pit, watching the trickle of water through the barred aperture becoming a cascade and then a miniature waterfall.

"So this is how they liquidate their dangerous criminals," Captain Blue muttered. "In the eighteen sixties, maybe it was a good old Chinese custom, but nowadays I'd have thought they would have risen above it."

"Maybe they have. I saw steel shutters outside the grille. Guess they shut those when the tide's in—but let the miscreants sweat in here for a bit first. Corrective training. Maybe they find it effective."

“Wouldn’t surprise me at all.”

Scarlet frowned. “Unfortunately we’re not dealing with the Chinese police force—but with Mysterons. Captain Black must have planned this.”

“Why didn’t he order that commander stooge to have us topped and done with it?”

“Because it would have been too simple, I guess. This is part of the overall game. They usually allow us one tiny loophole of escape—and if we’re lucky or smart enough we find it in time.”

“Jupiter! We’ll sure need to be lucky *this* time. I’m right out of smart ideas.”

A few minutes later the water was up to their armpits. Presently they were swimming—and other things were swimming with them, things with beady eyes that gleamed evilly in the light from the aperture. Rapidly the water rose, climbing up to the tide level. By the time it reached the window, the tide was already inches above the sill. A small procession of sleek black rats swam out between the bars.

“Never thought I’d wish I was a rat,” Captain Blue said bitterly, as they grasped the bars to rest their weary arms. He looked at the ceiling a few feet above. “Any chance of the water stopping short of that? If we could float on our backs till the tide turns...”

“Sorry, Adam,” Scarlet said quietly. “We might as well face it—that highwater mark is above the ceiling level.” They fell silent, grimly watching the water inching higher up the jetty piles towards the mark.

And a hundred and fifty miles away, the sleek shape of the *Oceanus X*, its speed reduced by its computer control, nosed slowly through the East China Sea towards the Yangtse mouth.

CHAPTER 9

Race Against Time

CAPTAIN SCARLET JERKED his head up. The water had been lapping about his chin. Grimly he regarded the top of the barred aperture. Another foot or so and even this precious daylight would be shut out by the relentlessly rising river.

In sudden desperation, Scarlet gripped the bars tightly and strained at them, trying to wrench them from their sockets. Then he froze, staring incredulously across the swirling water beyond the bars.

“Adam!” he gasped. “Look—that launch!”

A small white launch was speeding across the wide river towards them. At the wheel was a figure in a dirty blue quilted jacket and a flop-brimmed straw hat. He looked like a Chinese waterman, but just visible through the zipper opening of the jacket was a brown-coloured tunic.

“Lieutenant Umber!” Blue exclaimed.

Breathlessly, hearts pounding, they watched as Umber brought the launch broadside on to the barred window opening where they clung. He cut the motor and swiftly moored the boat to the bars.

“A thousand pardons for leaving it so late, my friends,” he smiled, “but there were complications.”

He began working on the bars with an acid jet, casting occasional glances towards the police jetty. Minutes seemed to hang in space, but at last he tugged and the eroded bars gave, leaving an opening large enough for the two trapped Spectrum men to wriggle through at water level.

But, as they were about to climb into the launch, there was a startled shout, and a policeman ran on to the jetty, drawing a machine pistol.

“Hold very tight, my friends,” Lieutenant Umber said tersely.

He triggered the motor to life and the launch swung away from the wall and hurtled up river, with Scarlet and Blue still clinging precariously to the side ropes.

The policeman started firing. A missile thunked into the boat close to Scarlet's head. Another whined above him and he heard Umber utter a gasping cry. He fell away from the controls and the launch began to career in a wild zigzag course in midstream, missing other craft by inches.

Scarlet hauled himself over the edge. The police officer was still firing, but the launch was not an easy target.

Stepping over his colleague's huddled form, Scarlet took over the controls, steering the launch on a straight course upstream in the middle of the wide fairway. Captain Blue clambered in and knelt beside Umber. The brown almond eyes of the Chinese were clouded with pain, but he forced a smile.

“I think I reach the end of my trail,” he murmured. “But it does not matter if you succeed in your task.” He gestured weakly to a sack on the bottom of the boat. “In there are your hats and equipment. One of our agents is a police orderly and fate decreed that the Mysteron ordered *him* to destroy your things. He told me where you were imprisoned. Goodbye, my friend. I—I hope very much that—that you succeed—”

His head fell back. Captain Blue's jaw tightened. This was the second loyal comrade they had lost since Operation *Oceanus* started. How many more were to go before it ended—in triumph or disaster?

The firing had stopped but, glancing back, Captain Blue saw that the two police hover launches were skimming low over the water in pursuit.

“Where is the thermic station, according to the microfiles?” Scarlet asked.

“On an island twenty-five miles upriver. But we’ll never make it in this crate, pal—not with those hovercraft on our tail. And they must have transmitted an alert to police posts higher up the river.”

“Yeah. We’ll have to get ashore. Hold tight!”

Scarlet swung the wheel hard over towards the south bank, and sent the launch hurtling through a narrow channel between a mass of small craft. Fishermen stared, children yelled excitedly—but whether urging them on or hurling imprecations, Scarlet couldn’t tell.

“Look out!” Blue shouted suddenly.

Round the bend in the channel had appeared a sampan poled by a bearded Chinese. There was barely room for the two craft to pass. Scarlet tried to go to the left, but the scared fisherman turned the same way. The speeding launch touched the bows of the sampan, cannoned off and charged a line of craft at the side of the channel. There was a cacophony of splintering wood, terrified yells, and squawking ducks and chickens, before the launch brought up against a jetty with a jarring crash that nearly flung the Spectrum captains into the water.

“Let’s get out of here!” Captain Blue gasped, grabbing the sack and leaping on to a sampan. Scarlet followed close at his heels. A startled old Chinese stuck his head out of the crude matting cabin and withdrew hastily at the sight of the two foreigners in the strange uniforms.

They clambered up on to the jetty. Scarlet, looking back, saw the police hover launches speeding down the channel. They zoomed up over the sampan with which Scarlet had collided and made straight for the jetty.

An officer was standing up in the leading launch, pointing a gun at them and jabbering. As they raced along the jetty, he fired, and missiles whined

dangerously close. Then they were plunging out of range into a narrow, stinking alley between fishermen's huts.

As they reached the end of the alley, a man in the dress of a coolie appeared. They checked, wary, and he smiled and held out his hand to show a Spectrum pass cradled in his palm.

"Come!" he said.

The coolie hurried them through a maze of alleys where stolid-faced Chinese stared incuriously, and into a derelict house.

"You will not get far in those uniforms," he said. "There is a general police alert out for you."

He gave them loose jackets and long baggy trousers, outsize shoes that covered their service boots like goloshes, and ragged straw hats. Then he strapped packs to their backs, put staves in their hands, and led them out through another doorway.

"Agent 0063 is in the next precinct," he said. "I will take you there. Follow me at ten paces."

He went off and they followed, shambling along with bent heads, taking the strain of their burdens, as Chinese coolies had done for centuries.

When they reached the end of the alley, a police car cruised past, and Scarlet tensed as he recognised the young captain who had originally arrested them. But the officer spared them only a cursory glance before the car sped on.

Presently the Spectrum agent stopped outside a small clothing store to allow them to catch up with him. "In here," he murmured.

"We had to leave Lieutenant Umber in the boat," Scarlet said. "He's dead."

The agent inclined his head. "He will be a great loss to our organisation. I will attend to things. Now you must hurry."

They entered the store. A Chinese came out of the gloom, glanced at Scarlet's Spectrum pass, then turned and led the way into a yard where an ancient saloon car stood. He motioned to them to get in the back seat, edged himself behind the wheel, and drove out of the yard and along an alley at a breakneck speed, scattering wandering chickens and causing pedestrians to leap to safety.

A mile or so outside the city, he turned into a modern service station near the river. A Chinese in the office looked up and nodded at the driver, then the doors of a big garage slid open. The car entered and the door closed again.

Getting out of the old car, the Spectrum men discarded their coolie disguises and put on the caps and equipment that the dead Lieutenant Umber had retrieved for them.

The driver pressed a button, and the apparently solid concrete wall at the rear of the garage sank silently into the floor to reveal the dull-grey sides of a Spectrum pursuit vehicle, the Spectrum badge gleaming in the sparse light. Doors swung open on either side of the S.P.V. There were seats attached to the inner surfaces. Scarlet and Blue sat in them and the doors closed to bring them facing the rear of the vehicle. Scarlet was at the controls and above them was a video screen by means of which the vehicle was steered. Scarlet spoke into a microphone.

"S.P.V. 286 ready to leave."

The rear wall of the secret garage slid down into the floor. Scarlet triggered the powerful motors into life and, with a deep throated roar, the S.P.V. rumbled from the garage, bucketed across a stretch of waste ground and hit the wide motorway running west towards the distant hills.

At two hundred miles an hour the S.P.V. roared along the motorway. Drivers of massive multi-wheeled trucks, themselves capable of a hundred



miles an hour, stared incredulously as the strange vehicle streaked past them as if they were standing still. Presently a sign appeared on the right, at the entrance to a branch road: THERMIC POWER STATION.

Scarcely checking his speed, Scarlet swung the S.P.V. into it. The road ran parallel to the river, built on piles over flat marshy land, studded here and there with clumps of tall willows. A massive barrier with red and white zebra lines came into view,

above it a big sign which said, THERMIC STATION. NO UNAUTHORISED VEHICLES ALLOWED PAST THIS POINT.

The S.P.V. crashed through the barrier!

Above the trees appeared the white towers, gantries and energy-beaming antennae of the power station. Scarlet cut his speed as the road

bent towards the river. Here, a smaller barrier stood at the entrance to a causeway, which carried the road over an arm of the river to the flat island on which the thermic station was built.

Scarlet applied the brakes and steered the S.P.V. among the trees, until it was completely hidden from the road.

“You stay here. I’ll go across and investigate,” Scarlet said. “No sense in both of us sticking our necks out. If I’m not back in thirty minutes then you can start worrying.”

Captain Blue looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“Thirty minutes? The *Oceanus* may be here by then.”

Captain Scarlet smiled tightly. “Yes—that’s what I meant by worrying. But don’t get crazy ideas about coming to look for me, pal. Get out of here fast!”

“But...”

“You heard.” Scarlet patted his friend’s shoulder. “I’m indestructible—you’re not.”

Scarlet went off through the trees. He expected to be challenged at the barrier, but there was no one in the control box. He climbed the barrier and went at a fast, loping run over the causeway. A massive twenty-foot high plasti-concrete wall surrounded the station. The big entrance gates were of solid lead-lined steel, inches thick, and beside them was a wicket gate. It was shut.

A moment of manipulation with an electronic key and the gate swung open.

He went in warily, drawing his anti-Mysteron gun. There was something odd about this place. The stations were run by skeleton staffs, for they were fully computerised, but it seemed strange that there should be no

one on the gates... not even a security guard. He passed the gatekeeper's office when nausea suddenly swept through him.

He swung. In the entrance to the office stood a Chinese in the blue-and-white uniform of the World Power Organisation, a gun in his hand.

"No unauthorised person admitted," he said in a toneless Mysteron voice, his cold, dark eyes inscrutable.

His finger was about to press the trigger button when Scarlet fired. The blue-white ray from the electron-ray gun struck the Mysteronised gatekeeper in the throat and with a low sigh he crumpled under the impact. Scarlet ran on towards the big building which housed the main power transmitters.

The entrance was open and just outside was sprawled a grey-haired Chinese in laboratory overalls. The insignia on his jacket identified him as one of the senior technicians in charge of the station. Scarlet bent over him. He was dead. Killed by a lethal dart in the throat.

Entering cautiously, Scarlet found himself in a control chamber, one wall of which was a massive computer on which coloured lights flickered. Spread-eagled on his back before it was another, younger Chinese also in technician's overalls. As the Spectrum man bent over him, his lips moved as if he were trying to say something. Scarlet knelt beside him and cradled the man's head on his arm.

"What happened?"

"Man—in black," the Chinese said weakly. "Down in—in reaction chamber." With a great effort he raised his hand and gestured vaguely at the controls of the computer. "Switch... switch..."

His voice trailed off. He was dead.

Scarlet laid him gently down and stood up, looking grimly at the maze of controls. It was obvious it had been a precaution that he urged Scarlet to

take, but which switch had he meant?

The only two men who could have known were dead—killed by Captain Black. And now Captain Black was down in the reaction chamber.

His mouth went dry with apprehension.

Scarlet turned. On the far side of the chamber was an elevator shaft. The radiation-proof gate was closed, and the indicator showed that the cage was at the bottom of the shaft. Beside it was the entrance to a service stairway. He darted across the chamber and descended the spiralling stairs, swiftly and silently.

At the bottom Scarlet was confronted by a thick transparent door, through which he could see into a circular chamber walled by some dull grey metal which, he assumed, was a lead-based alloy. Almost opposite him was a bank of dials and flickering lights, and running down through the centre of the chamber from ceiling to the lead-lined floor was a tube some two feet in diameter. The tube must have been made of transparent material, for inside it flickered a weird violet light which seemed to pulsate to a regular rhythm.

There appeared to be no one in the chamber. But there was a section on either side of the door that he could not see. He could not sense the presence of the Mysteron, but realised that the door was probably radiation proof and would screen Mysteron vibrations.

There was a button beside it. He pressed it and the door slid open.

Gun poised, he stepped in. Silently the door began to close behind him. He looked for a button switch, but there was none. He was trapped.

Cursing himself for being so careless, he looked for the entrance to the elevator shaft, and was just in time to see the anti-radiation gate closing. Then the indicator light showed that the cage was ascending rapidly.

Was Captain Black inside?

If he'd had a lurking doubt, it was dispelled a few moments later when, from the intercom speaker in the control panel, the Mysteron's cold voice echoed, filling the room.

"You have been both clever and lucky, Captain Scarlet, but this time there is no escape. In fifteen minutes, the *Oceanus* will be coming within range. It will radiate impulses which will activate a detonating device I have placed in the reaction chamber. The thermic station will explode as those at Sydney and Rio de Janeiro did, and then the penultimate stage of our plan will be put into operation."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"But you will not see it, Captain Scarlet. Even a Mysteronised being cannot survive the disintegration of such an explosion. Farewell, Captain Scarlet!"

The speaker went dead. The only sound in the chamber was a faint humming. Scarlet fought back the feeling of panic. Time and training in the World Army Air Force had taught him to remain cool. Fifteen minutes, Captain Black said—Mysterons were never wrong.

He moved round the chamber to the control panel. It looked fairly simple. But he knew nothing of the set-up of the thermic power station, beyond the generalities he had picked up since Operation *Oceanus* had started. Trying to contact Cloudbase to ask for technical guidance was useless—no radio waves would penetrate these insulated walls.

Or would they? How was the *Oceanus* going to activate the device unless it was by some kind of radiation?

He pulled down his peak microphone and spoke into it. There was no reply. The circuit was dead!

A high humming sound filled the room. It came from somewhere behind him. He turned and then froze, staring at the central tube. The eerie

violet light was more intense, and it was pulsating in time with the humming!

He went closer! The sound drew him like a homing device. And then he saw it—a tiny black domed disc fixed to the tube. This was emitting the droning signal.

Just what was it?

Had the Mysterons' science, centuries ahead of Earth's, evolved some marvel that, in defiance of accepted natural laws, permitted electromagnetic waves to pass through normally insulating substances? It would explain a lot—including their uncanny ability to tap messages transmitted by Earth organisations through carefully screened channels.

But one thing was obvious. Without this device the *Oceanus* could not destroy the station, of this he was certain! If he could remove it from the tube... if...

He gripped the disc, trying to pry it from the tube. It clung like a limpet. He tried turning it in either direction. It did not move! He took a tool from his kit and tried to prise it off, but in vain. It was as if the strange black disc was fused to the tube. In a sudden surge of frustration he raised his anti-Mysteron gun and levelled it at the black disc. His finger was already on the button when he remembered that the charge might trigger the explosion!

He lowered his weapon in despair, recalling Captain Black's cold, mocking words.

"You have been both clever and lucky, Captain Scarlet, but this time there is no escape."

Captain Black had more than once been wrong, for even Mysterons were not infallible, but this time it seemed that he was right!! And then he suddenly recalled something else that Captain Black had said, the

significance of which had escaped him at the time. ...*the penultimate stage of our plan will be put into operation!*

Surely that could only mean there were *two* more stages after this one? The detonation of the Nanking thermic station was not the ultimate objective of the Mysterons. The knowledge lifted his despair a little, and with it came a thought that had not occurred to him before.

He turned to the transparent door of the service stairway. It was his only hope. Scarlet raised the electron ray gun and fired several short, sharp bursts. The blue-white shaft of energy fused through the tough plastic like a hot wire through butter. In seconds, he had made a hole big enough to enable him to climb through. He glanced at his watch. It needed barely five minutes to zero.

He raced up the stairs and into the control chamber. The door was still open, admitting the precious daylight that he thought he would never see again. The two dead technicians lay where they had been left. He pulled down his peak microphone and called Cloudbase.

Rapidly he explained the situation to Colonel White.

“If only I knew which switch that poor devil was trying to warn me to press, sir! Is there any way you can find out?”

“In the space of a few minutes? Are you crazy, Scarlet?”

“You’ve just got to try, sir.”

“S.I.G. Hold on! But if anything seems likely to break before I come through, save yourself”

The radio went dead. A deep throbbing hum filled the air. The lights on the computer were flickering crazily. Bitterly, Scarlet realised now that with radio contact cut, the last hope of saving the station had gone, and that he was needed in the continued fight against the Mysterons. He ran from the

building through the yard. Now that throbbing hum pounded through his brain.

The wicket gate was still open. He ran through it, feeling that his lungs would burst—if his brain didn't first with the terrible throbbing. He stumbled onto the causeway. Louder and louder the throbbing hum grew! In final desperation he clambered up onto the parapet of the causeway and dived.

As he hit the water, the whole universe seemed to erupt about him and he hurtled down into oblivion!

CHAPTER 10

Desert Showdown

AT THE FAR END of a long dark tunnel there was a dim light and a faint voice was speaking. Gradually the light became brighter and the voice louder.

“Here he comes! By Jupiter, it’s been a long haul this time.”

The light exploded as if a white hot torch was being flashed close to his eyes—and then Scarlet realised that he was gazing up at one of the arc lamps in the operating theatre at Cloudbase, and that the voice was that of Doctor Fawn, talking to a medical orderly.

Scarlet smiled weakly. “Hiya, Doc! Here we are again!”

“This time I thought you weren’t going to make it, Captain. Retrometabolism was slower than usual.”

“You mean—the Mysterionisation could be wearing off?”

“I hope not—specially if you’re going to continue to take the same crazy risks. Luckily, this time Captain Blue got you here in one piece.”

Scarlet sat up and the young doctor handed him a beaker containing a dark brown fluid. “Drink that—it’s not poison, even if it tastes like it.”

As Scarlet gulped down the potion and felt renewed strength begin to flow through his limbs, Doctor Fawn regarded him curiously.

“When you’re out like that, don’t you ever dream?” he asked.

“No—why?”

“Just figured the dreams might be interesting. If we could have them computer-analysed we might come up with some useful information about the Mysterons.”

“That’s a thought,” Scarlet agreed. “But I guess there’s just black oblivion. How did Captain Blue get me out of that spot, anyway?”

“Ask him yourself.” The doctor indicated Scarlet’s colleague, who was entering the theatre.

Captain Blue’s rugged, good-looking face lit up in relief at the sight of Scarlet.

“Thank heaven you’re okay,” he said. “When I got you here you looked as though you’d been through an old-fashioned mangle.”

“Flat out, huh?”

Blue laughed and playfully punched Scarlet’s bare shoulder. Then he became serious.

“A lot’s happened since you took a dive off that causeway, buddy. The Old Man wants to quiz you. I’ll fill you in with the details while you’re getting dressed.”

The orderly handed Scarlet a dressing gown and he followed Blue from the hospital bay. As he dressed in his living quarters, Captain Blue told Scarlet how he had been watching through glasses from the clump of trees, and had seen him rushing onto the causeway.

“When I saw you dive over, I took a dive myself into a dyke. Boy, did she blow! That ditch water was near boiling. There wasn’t a leaf left on the trees and they were smouldering like snuffed candles. The station just wasn’t there—even the island had gone.”

“What about the S.P.V.?”

“Scorched like a piece of forgotten toast, but the trees protected it, I guess. I had to wait for the hull to cool down before I could get in—and then I set off downstream to look for you.”

“Optimist, huh?” Scarlet grinned, slipping a new tunic over his head.

“I found you four miles downstream, wedged between two boulders. Miraculously, you hadn’t drowned, but as I said...”

“Sure, we’ll skip the gory details, pal,” Scarlet said. “How did you get me back here with every cop around Nanking hunting for us?”

“After the explosion they didn’t have time to worry about us, brother. I radioed agent 0063 in Nanking. He picked up the Spectrum jet from the airport and flew it out to me. The rest was a matter of time.”

“How much time?”

“About seven hours, I guess. Three hours to get you back to Cloudbase—the rest Doc’s been patching you up.”

Captain Scarlet ran a comb through his dark hair and took the new cap which Blue handed to him. “But China as a whole *wasn’t* devastated, as the Colonel feared? The explosion was confined to the station?”

“That’s right—or we wouldn’t be here!”

They left the room and went along the corridor towards the control room. “What about the *Oceanus*?” asked Scarlet.

“She got away. The Colonel bulldozed the World President into having another go at the Chinese bossman, to persuade him to stop the sub leaving the Yangtse. But old Han Wong treated him to a harangue about this being a World Federation plot against China. Things looked pretty grim—the World forces were put on a red alert. Then suddenly the whole thing blew over.”

“Just a storm in a China tea cup, huh?” said Scarlet, with a flat grin.

“Apparently some Chinese scientists made Han Wong see sense. He apologised abjectly to the World President and said he would take immediate action to destroy the silent saboteur.”

“But, of course, by then it was too late?”

“You can say that again.”

“So where’s the *Oceanus X* now?”

“The Colonel will brief you about that.”

As they entered the control room, Colonel White turned from a window. The high sun struck gold from his white hair.

“Let’s hear your story, Scarlet,” he said, as they sat down on the stools which rose from the floor. “I’ve heard Blue’s angle.”

When Scarlet had finished, the Colonel said, “Your hunch about the penultimate stage which Captain Black mentioned was right. It is obvious now that China was not the threatened nation. We are convinced it is the United States.”

“But how?”

“The Mysteron plan seems simple enough now—diabolically simple. Maybe if they hadn’t laid so many red herrings we should have tumbled to it sooner.

“The controller of the scientific division of the World Power Organisation has come up with a fact known to very few of his subordinates, and certainly not to the executive division.

“As you know, the power network is supplied by energy tapped at, or near, the Earth’s centre, through a gigantic shaft beneath the Nevada Desert. From the Nevada mother station, the energy is beamed via satellites to six substations about the world, which in turn supply their own vast areas. Or did! There are, unfortunately, now only *three* sub-stations.”

“That’s bad, Colonel!”

“Mighty bad, Captain Scarlet. As a safety precaution, the computer control in Nevada was programmed to spread the load if a sub-station went out of action. The amount of energy tapped from the Earth’s dynamo—if we can call it that—is constant each day. When Sydney station was blown up, the load was spread automatically, the surplus energy being beamed in equal quantities to the remaining five stations. When Rio station blew, the

same process was repeated, and again when Nanking station was destroyed.”

“And now, sir?” Captain Blue asked.

The Colonel’s face tightened. “If a fourth station is destroyed, the situation will get out of hand. Two things will happen. First, too much energy will be beamed to the two remaining stations, which will explode. *That* in effect is how the Mysterons exploded the three stations—by beaming to them energy in excess of what they could cope with.”

“And second,” suggested Scarlet, “the Nevada station will be unable to get rid of the energy it’s tapping—and *that* will go up too, sir?”

“Exactly—but with this vital difference. The explosions at the sub-stations, as we have seen, will be localised. But if Nevada blows, there will be a chain reaction beneath the Earth. Geophysicists estimate that most of the United States will be blown asunder, as if a colossal nuclear device had been set off under it. What few fringe areas might escape would suffer from intense radiation and fall-out—which would also menace the rest of the Earth, of course.”

The two Spectrum captains stared in shocked horror at their chief.

“But surely there’s some extra precaution that could be taken, sir?” asked Scarlet. “Something that would act as a safety valve?”

“The sub-stations *were* the safety valves, Captain. The designers of the power system never visualised four of them being destroyed within days of each other—far faster than they could be rebuilt. In the normal way of things, that would be inconceivable.”

“So there’s just one station between the U.S.A. and obliteration, sir?” Scarlet said gravely. “And we’ve got to guess which—is that it?”

“No time for guessing, Captain. I’m convinced it’s Copenhagen. The pattern’s plain enough now, I think—Australia, Brazil, China—Denmark.

A... B... C... D.”

Colonel White signalled to Lieutenant Green, who switched on the big display map screen, showing the East Asian sector from the tropic of Cancer to the Arctic Circle.

“We figure the *Oceanus* left the Yangtse about six hours ago. There are three possible routes it could take to Copenhagen. Down through the Pacific, round Cape Horn, and then up through the Atlantic; back around south-east Asia and via the Indian Ocean and the Cape of Good Hope; or through the Bering Strait and under the Arctic ice north of Canada. We’re ignoring the Panama and Suez canals, which are too easily blocked.”

“The Arctic route’s much the shortest, sir,” Blue said.

“And for that reason I believe the Mysterons will have originally planned to take it. And, as you know, they never willingly deviate from a plan once it is formulated.”

He nodded to Lieutenant Green, who pressed a switch. A blip appeared on the map between Commander Island and the western extremity of the Aleutian island chain.

“The computer shows that, if our hunch is right and the *Oceanus* is proceeding to the Bering Strait at maximum speed, it is around this point now,” the Colonel went on. “World Naval forces are concentrating at the strait. The odds are on them stopping the *Oceanus* there.”

“Suppose she *does* get through?” Scarlet asked.

“It will be hopeless to try to stop her getting round under the ice—there are countless channels she could take into Baffin Bay. Our second—and last—line of defence will have to be the narrow sea approaches to Copenhagen itself.”

The Colonel smiled wearily. “Well, that’s the position, gentlemen. If my hunch is right, within the hour we may be hearing something—I hope to our

advantage, as the solicitors put it. Meanwhile, all we can do is wait.”

Fifty minutes later, Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue were playing four-handed electronic chess with Captains Ochre and Grey in the rest room. Suddenly, a buzzer sounded, and Colonel White appeared on the intercom video-screen.

“Good news, gentlemen!” he said with a grim smile. “The *Oceanus X* was destroyed as of three minutes ago.”

“Thank goodness for that!” drawled Grey. “Now maybe I can get a spot of leave that’s due to me, sir?”

“I’m afraid not, Captain. All operatives will remain on red alert. From what we know of our previous clashes with the Mysterons, I suspect they may have an alternative plan, which will be immediately put into operation.”

The Colonel was right. Only two hours later the red alert signal sounded and Lieutenant Green’s voice came over the intercom.

“Captains Scarlet and Blue will take off immediately in passenger jet for the U.S.A. Captain Grey will act as pilot.” Minutes later, the plane was airborne and screaming west around the curve of the Earth, chasing the afternoon sun.

Captain Scarlet said into his cap microphone, “Awaiting briefing, sir.”

“Captain Cherry reports from Utah that Black has arrived at Salt Lake City by I.T.A. stratojet and is travelling south-west along auto highway 763 towards Nevada. All field operatives have been ordered to converge on the sector. You will take command, Captain Scarlet.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Whatever he’s aiming to do, Captain—he must be stopped at all costs. But don’t rush it. He probably knows we’re on his tail, but if we act precipitately he may go to ground—and that could be fatal.”

“S.I.G. Maybe you could fill me in en route with details of the Nevada power control station, sir. It seems that’s what he’s making for.”

The Spectrum jet landed on a small airfield near the Nevada-Utah border, in the foothills west of the Sage Brush range. Captain Cherry, a rangy, straw-haired Arizonian, who looked as if he’d feel more at home on a horse, met Scarlet and Blue when they alighted.

“He went through less than twenty minutes ago,” he reported. “Took the Pioche branch highway. He’s driving a dark blue Jetmobile special—top speed one-fifty. But he’s in no hurry, cruising at a hundred or so.”

“You’ve got someone tailing him?” asked Scarlet.

“Sure. Two guys in an old station wagon with a Spectrum saloon engine. It’s piled with prospectors’ junk. I’ve got two agents waiting in Pioche to take over.”

“S.I.G.,” Scarlet said. “You were going to have a Spectrum saloon ready for us?”

“It’s in the shed.”

“Nice work.”

“You want me to scout ahead and try to locate him?” asked Captain Grey from the ’plane hatch.

“No,” Scarlet said. “You stand by here, pal. Colonel says not to scare him underground. We’ll radio if we need you.”

Grey looked disappointed. “Some guys like to hog all the fun.”

Scarlet smiled tightly. “This isn’t going to be fun, pal. The lives of nearly three hundred million people may depend on us playing this right.” He looked at Captain Blue. “Let’s go! We’ve got around forty miles to make up on that guy.”

They entered the shed. A gleaming red, streamlined Spectrum saloon stood there. Scarlet got behind the wheel and Blue slid in beside him.

Captain Cherry looked through the window. “That station wagon’s radio channel is 967—and, if you need it, S.P.V. 149 is garaged at Crystal Springs.”

“Crystal Springs?” Scarlet queried. “That’s way out on the edge of beyond, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. Nothing between there and the Californian border—except the thermic station, plumb in the middle of the old Lava Fields territory. Good luck, fellers!”

The saloon nosed out of the shed and sped smoothly across the tarmac, taking what was little more than a dirt track that led, after a few dusty miles, on to the main Pioche highway. The highway, a flat ribbon of greyish white, wound off into the heat-hazed distance, through desolate, cactus-dotted desert.

Scarlet let the speedometer band creep up to one-thirty and held it there. In twenty minutes they would be in Pioche, would have picked up a few miles on Captain Black, although there was no urgency as yet.

He spoke into his peak microphone, making a routine report to Cloudbase, then asked for channel 967 to be opened.

After a moment or so a drawling voice said, “Channel 967. Agent 085 speaking.”

“This is Captain Scarlet. Where’s your quarry?”

“He’s a couple miles ahead, Captain—can see him just topping the next ridge.”

“How far are you from Pioche?”

“About twenty miles, I guess.”

“S.I.G. Close up on him a bit. There are a couple of forks before you get to the town. We don’t want him sliding off along one.”

“Okay, Captain!”

Scarlet switched on the auto-locator map of Nevada. The Lava Fields—the name spoke for itself, he thought—was a desolate waste some seventy miles square, bounded on the north by the Goldfields Desert, on the south by the Great Amargoza Desert, and running from the Kawich Mountains in the east to the Grapevine Mountains in the west, beyond which lay the Lost Valley and Death Valley of California.

The whole of this vast, mountainous desert country, still sparsely inhabited, was dotted with such sinister names, that spoke of man's bitter struggle to conquer an unconquerable country.

"You figure Captain Black's aiming for the remote control centre?" asked Captain Blue.

"Yes." Scarlet pointed to a spot at the southern tip of the Kawich range. "It's located there."

Blue frowned. "Maybe I'm dim, but I don't see how he can blow the station."

"No? Remember what the Colonel said? The mother station taps a strictly regulated amount of energy each day—just as much as it could normally dispense to the six substations. Now three of them are destroyed, their load is being shared equally by the other three."

"Sure, but the mother station can cope—so what?"

Scarlet sent the car hurtling round an S-bend between towering red buttes before he replied.

"Suppose the energy intake from the Earth's centre was stepped up by the daily capacity of an extra station—or maybe two?"

Captain Blue stared at him. "Good grief! That would have the same effect as if a fourth station was destroyed—three stations couldn't cope with a seven or eight station load any more than two could cope with a six load."

"You're learning fast, pal."

“You have to, at this game,” said Captain Blue grimly. “But how’s Black gonna tap that extra load?”

“There’s a manual control that will do it—installed in case further sub-stations were wanted.”

“Why manual?”

“To avoid the chance of an electronic mishap. It’s known to only two or three of the top brass of the W.P.O., and it’s in a sealed vault. The combination that will open the vault is kept in a safe deposit in Unity City.”

“Gee, these guys sure don’t take any chances, do they? And you reckon Captain Black can get into that vault, huh?”

Scarlet smiled tightly as the car swept over a viaduct a thousand feet above a narrow ravine.

“You know darn well he can, pal.”

“Why the blazes didn’t the Mysterons try this angle in the first place?”

“Why didn’t they beam energy from their complex on Mars and blow the station? We both know the answer—it would have been too darn easy. This is a war of nerves. Playing it this way, they give us an outside chance of stopping them—if we’re clever enough or lucky enough, as Captain Black put it back in Nanking.”

Captain Blue laughed flatly. “What are we banking on now, buddy—our brains or our luck?”

“We’ll play it as it comes, pal. There’ll be security guards at the control centre. Black can’t just walk in and yank down that lever or whatever it is. If he’s playing a lone hand, he’s got to play it crafty.”

“Well, he’s sure had plenty of practice.”

Ten miles on, agent 085 came through.

“Guess you were right, Captain. Looks like he’s bypassing Pioche. He’s taken the south fork—the old road that runs through Bullion Valley to

Crystal Springs.”

“S.I.G.,” said Scarlet. “We’ll close up. Don’t lose him—but don’t try to tackle him. He’s dynamite.”

“Okay.”

Scarlet contacted Captain Grey at the airfield.

“Tell Captain Cherry to instruct his agents in Pioche to proceed to Crystal Springs at maximum speed, and stand by for further instructions.”

“S.I.G.”

The red saloon streaked through the foothills of the Ely Range. An occasional car or a heavy, streamlined transcontinental cargo truck, a service station, a huddle of adobe huts that had once been a Ute Indian settlement—they were the only signs that this wild country was or ever had been inhabited.

They reached the south fork that the agent had mentioned. It was an old tarmac road in need of repair that dipped into a river valley and ran for miles beside an abandoned railroad. The deep dust showed the recent tracks of two vehicles.

Presently the road zigzagged up the valley slope and through a rocky pass between two razorback ridges. Beyond the pass it ran above a deep ravine.

Suddenly Scarlet slammed on the air brakes.

“One of those sets of tyre tracks has vanished,” he said. “Let’s take a look.”

They walked back to where the deeper wheel tracks swerved off the road across the stony scrub-dotted verge and vanished over the edge of the ravine. Looking over, Scarlet saw the scars made by a vehicle ploughing down the sheer wall, but the brush at the bottom was too thick for him to see the wreck of the vehicle.

His face tight, he tried to contact agent 085. There was no reply.

“That was them, huh?” Blue said flatly.

“Seems like it. I’ll radio Captain Cherry to send out a rescue squad, but I wouldn’t hold out much hope for them. Let’s go! It could be a Mysteron dodge to delay us.”

They hurtled on down the mountain road, screamed round a bend where the gravelly dust set the car skidding perilously close to the ravine edge. As Scarlet straightened it out, Captain Blue gripped his arm.

“Look!” he gasped.

At the inner side of the road, nose buried in scrub and boulders as if it had skidded there, was a decrepit station wagon piled with prospectors’ gear. Beside it a man in an overall suit was sprawled, apparently unconscious. Over him stood another man in jeans and checkered shirt and a battered slouch hat. He was signalling frantically and shouting to them to stop.

“Heck—*that’s* them!” Blue growled. “So what went into the ravine?”

“Hold tight!” Scarlet snapped.

He accelerated past the signalling man, skidding the saloon round another bend.

“What the blazes!” Blue gasped.

“Use your loaf, pal! That’s a typical Mysteron set-up—crashing a vehicle and then recreating it and its driver.”

“Mysteronised, huh?” Blue grinned ruefully. “Must be getting dumb in my old age.” He glanced back. “You’re dead right—they’re on our tail already.”

“See them off.”

“S.I.G.”

Drawing his anti-Mysteron gun, Captain Blue climbed into the back of the speeding car, opening the window.

“Slow down a little, buddy,” he ordered. “Let ’em get within range.”

When Scarlet obeyed, the Mysteronised station wagon, powered by a similar engine to the saloon, closed in rapidly. Blue could see the pale face of the man in the checkered shirt behind the wheel.

He pressed the firing button of the weapon. The high voltage ray, invisible in the bright sunlight, seared through the radiator. There was a violent explosion and the vehicle leapt from the road, twisting sideways, somersaulted and hurtled down into the ravine.

“Guess our friends will be Mysteronising them again,” Blue said, rejoining Scarlet.

“They won’t bother—they never repeat a trick. But Captain Black will know we made out. He’ll be trying something else—so keep your eyes peeled.”

But they reached Crystal Springs half an hour later without further trouble.

The town was like something out of an old Western video film, a dying settlement of adobe and false fronts that was well on the way to becoming yet another ghost town. As the red saloon pulled up in the plaza to become the centre of attention and speculation for a crowd of children and leathery-faced old-timers, a Spectrum agent in white overall suit and stetson greeted Scarlet.

“Our friend’s ten minutes ahead of you, Captain,” he drawled. “The S.P.V.’s in the old stables at the rear of the hotel.”

“S.I.G. Follow in the saloon.”

Two minutes later S.P.V. 149 sped out of the sleepy old town, shattering the desert quiet with the roar of its powerful motors. At two hundred miles

an hour it hurtled along the narrow, specially-constructed white road that was signposted W.P.O. CONTROL CENTRE 93 MILES. NO THROUGH ROAD.

“Ten minutes’ start on us puts him twenty miles ahead—if he’s flat out,” Captain Blue said, watching the straight deserted white ribbon of road slipping away in the monitor screen.

“Sure—and in less than thirty minutes he’ll reach the control centre. It’s gonna be touch and go whether we catch him in time,” Scarlet said grimly.

The road deviated little. In places it leapt ravines and gorges, straddled valleys on high viaducts, dived into tunnels through the hills. It was over twenty minutes before they saw anything else on the road. Then they sighted a big blue and white streamlined truck bucketing ahead of them at a hundred miles an hour. As they rapidly overhauled it, Scarlet saw the letters W.P.O. on the rear.

The burly driver’s jaw dropped in amazement when, in his mirror, he saw the weird monster of a vehicle overtaking, and he was already applying his air brakes when Scarlet signalled to him to stop. Captain Blue ran back to the truck.

“Spectrum, huh?” the driver grinned. “Until I spotted them badges I figured you were somethin’ from outer space. Never seen an S.P.V. before.”

“Has a dark blue Jetmobile Special overtaken you?”

“Sure—not five minutes ago. He was moving some. But what gives? This road don’t lead nowhere but the W.P.O. centre.”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” Blue said cryptically, racing back to the S.P.V.

A few miles further on the pursuit vehicle roared into a long tunnel.

“He can’t be more than a mile or so ahead,” Scarlet said. “We should spot him when we’re through.”

Beyond the tunnel the road stabbed across a lake, on a viaduct some miles long, straight for an igloo-shaped white structure nestling on a mountain slope. Beyond was the desolate plain of the Lava Fields. In the centre stood the thermic station itself.

Nothing moved on the road. Scarlet frowned. Had they underestimated Captain Black's speed? He radioed the W.P.O. centre, growing rapidly larger at the end of the viaduct.

"Anyone entered or tried to enter in the last few minutes?" he demanded.

"Nope. We've instructions not to admit any unauthorised persons, anyway."

"Okay. Keep it that way, pal."

Scarlet stopped the S.P.V.

"Gonna block the road?" asked Blue.

"No. I've got a hunch Black's playing it crafty. Maybe he realised he couldn't race us to the centre. He might have pulled off the road somewhere the other side of the tunnel. Let's back-track."

Turning the vehicle, Scarlet sent it racing back into the tunnel.

They were almost through when he saw the W.P.O. truck thundering towards them. There was barely room for the two vehicles to pass, but with wrists of steel he kept the S.P.V. steady.

A moment or so later they emerged into the glare of the sunlight again. Scarlet reduced to cruising speed, and they scanned the road on either side for some sign of the Jetmobile having turned off.

It was some miles before they found it—almost hidden behind boulders and scrub in the mouth of a gully. They got down and examined it. It was empty.

They looked at each other, puzzled.

“Maybe he had a helijet or something hidden here,” Blue said.

“We’d have spotted it—Good grief! That truck!”

Scarlet ran back to the S.P.V., Blue at his heels. He sent the pursuit vehicle roaring back at maximum speed towards the tunnel.

“Radio the control centre guards not to let that truck through,” he said.

A moment later Blue looked grimly at him. “No contact! The channel’s dead—screened.”

The white-uniformed guard at the control centre pressed the switch that opened the massive gates. He grinned cheerfully up at the driver as the big truck rolled inside. He checked, staring blankly at the ashen face which looked down at him from the open window of the cab with cold, dark eyes.

“Say, what the...”

A gun appeared in the driver’s hand and spat fire. The guard, his own gun half out of its holster, gasped and crumpled to the ground. The Mysteronised driver dropped to the ground and walked slowly and deliberately like a robot towards the igloo-shaped concrete and glass building in the middle of the compound.

Scarlet sent the S.P.V. roaring across the viaduct. As it neared the control centre, he saw the big blue and white truck standing in the compound beyond the open gates.

Were they too late? Was the truck driver already operating the control that would seal the fate of the United States? He slammed on the brakes, timing it so finely that the nose of the S.P.V. touched the rear of the truck, nudging it forward.

Scarlet and Blue leapt out, anti-Mysteron guns ready. Scarlet saw the dead guard sprawled beside the truck. Beyond, others lay motionless before the entrance to the domed building that housed the computer controls.

Scarlet raced inside, and nearly fell over a bearded man in white overalls, who lay on his back, staring up at the transparent dome with sightless eyes. To one side of a computer bank that curved halfway round the big chamber, a massive steel door stood open.

He darted through the doorway.

A burly figure in the blue-trimmed white overall suit of the W.P.O. truck driver was slowly turning a gleaming wheel set in a control panel on which a green light glowed. The light turned to amber.

Scarlet pressed the trigger button of his weapon and a blue-white bolt of electricity leapt across the chamber and struck the saboteur in the back. Without a sound he sank to the floor. For a long agonising moment his lifeless hand clung to the wheel, his dead weight pulling on it.

Scarlet, frozen with apprehension, waited for that light to turn red. He could never get to it in time. Then the nerveless hand slipped from the wheel. Scarlet, his knees feeling like rubber, crossed the chamber and turned the wheel back until the green light appeared.

Sweat trickling down his face, he turned to Captain Blue, who was looking down at the dead Mysteron.

“It’s the truck driver,” Blue said hoarsely. “I figured it might have been Captain Black himself.”

“No, he must have got at this poor guy after you quizzed him back along the road. We haven’t heard the last of him, I guess.”

And from the radio speaker in the outer control chamber a cold voice said: “YOU HAVE NOT, CAPTAIN SCARLET. THIS TIME YOU HAVE BEATEN US. BUT WE SHALL STRIKE AGAIN AND AGAIN UNTIL YOUR CIVILISATION LIES IN RUINS. THERE IS NO ESCAPE FOR EARTH.”

THE END



The world's most advanced
and most deadly sub-
marine disappears. Top
secret Thermic power
stations at Rio de Janeiro
and Sydney are destroyed
within hours of each
other. And at the same
time an eccentric inventor
crashes his heli-jet
into the Pacific ocean.

**WE, THE MYSTERONS,
WILL DEVASTATE
YOUR GREATEST
NATION!**

Another battle of nerves
is waged on Earth by
the Mysterons. Spectrum
is green as its agents
go into action to avert
the biggest disaster of
all time. And the world
waits, panic stricken,
as the seconds tick away.